

30+ artists
4 authors

Shimmer- zine



a collaborative fanzine

I'M
GLAD
YOU'RE
AWFUL
TOO

conceal not your mistakes

but allow them to be a sputtering torch

illuminate the path for those that follow

to be gentle, to be kind





Clown
carZgo/
BEEF



Spiral

written by Majadin

art by eggcoatt

It was an abysmal fall day.

Some days in autumn are wonderful things, with a cool crispness to the air that carries with it the scent of fallen leaves and the faintest hint of frost to come. The sunshine still carries warmth, despite the fluffy clouds, and the energy of the world is one of anticipation, as if every little thing is holding its breath and waiting for its turn to change.

This was about as far from one of those days as it could get and still be part of the fall season. The sun had fled from view, driven from the sky by a thick blanket of dark, ominous grey clouds that hung low over Canterlot, barely clearing the needle tips of its tallest skyscrapers. Those storm clouds crept slow across the heavens—indeed, they seemed to have barely moved all day, and stretched to both ends of the horizon—occasionally emitting faint rumbles, as if they were the embodied spirit of a great cat of days gone by, on the prowl for some elusive, wary prey. It cast the world in a dim, depressive twilight, one done in shades of a dismal monochrome rather than vibrant blues, purples, and reds, and meant even at this early afternoon hour, all the cars had their lights on in a desperate attempt to push back the gloom.

It did not help overmuch, those yellow-and-sometimes-blue beams; it was as if nature herself had decided that she was no longer going to give even the barest inch to the overly clever primates and their unnatural devices.

Maybe it was the chill in the air, a clammy, damp coldness filled with the faint scent of rain far too icy this early in the season, sometimes manifesting as tendrils of smoky mist that crawled across the asphalt and slithered around moving legs and light poles, clinging to every surface and leeching the warmth from all they touched.

If anyone had asked Sunset Shimmer, the weather suited her mood *perfectly*.

The unicorn-turned-teenage-girl parked her bike in an obnoxious screech of tires that drew more than one sour glare, and she made a rude gesture in passing as she kicked her front door open, only to slam it behind her in a fit of pique. On any other bad day, such pettiness would have made her feel better, been as much an outlet

for her annoyance and frustration as laying into her punching bag with feet and fists.

"*Stupid Flash*," she muttered irritably to her empty loft. He had no way of knowing that she had planned to ditch the dance anyway, that she fully intended to be back in Equestria by the time they announced her name at the Fall Formal as the Princess. "*Stupid* dance committee," she added testily, because why couldn't they just *follow* her plans—why did that *irritating*, overly peppy ball of bubblegum and sunshine constantly have to "improve" on Sunset's carefully scripted ideas? Did she not understand how hard it was to make something happen according to plan when someone else kept trying to *change* those plans? Hours of work *wasted*, not to mention the blackmail she'd gone to all the trouble of using...none of it was any good now.

If that had been all, she probably would have been satisfied with the way she had broken her now ex-boyfriend's heart into little pieces when he had come to issue her an ultimatum over her actions as queen of the school, or found some way to ruin another of Pinkie Pie's parties that would have satisfied her need for revenge.

But *no*.

Sunset had made the mistake of checking the statue and the dormant portal.

This close to the thirty moon mark, she could manage to connect with her otherwise inaccessible magic and peer through the growing tie to her home world to view happenings on the other side like a one-way mirror.

The irony was not lost on Sunset, given the other end *was* a mirror.

It had been a lucky break that the Princess of the Sun had moved the mirror to one corner of the throne room, instead of leaving it in that dusty old storeroom. Sunset had been able to catch fleeting glimpses of what had passed during her exile to this nightmare realm of no magic and insane predators. The fiery unicorn wasn't sure what prompted Princess Celestia to do such a foolish thing, but she was not going to look that particular mantichore in the mouth too hard.

After all, that moment of weakness had allowed Sunset Shimmer to learn a great many things...like the return of the blue alicorn that she was fairly certain was the counterpart to the human Vice Principal and was also Nightmare Moon—who else could it be, given the legend spoke of an alicorn who raised the sun locking her own sister away in the moon? Or that her replacement had managed to find the Elements of Harmony, something Sunset had been researching herself previously.

What she had seen today though...

Fury coursed through her, blood red rage edged in black hatred at the mere memory!

That fawning, simpering, lavender *runt* being crowned a *princess*, with the feathery wings on her back a new addition, and an Element of Harmony resting above her horn as the centerpiece to the Crown that the little moke-spawn didn't *deserve*! That Crown... those wings... they should have been Sunset's! That pathetic little excuse for a unicorn no more deserved to be an alicorn than that irritating snot Cadenza had.

"Apple polishing, Grogar-kissed, hoof-lick!" the redhead snarled.

"Nightmare take her—and Celestia too! How *dare* she?!"

If someone had asked at that moment, Sunset wouldn't have been able to answer which 'she' was meant in her demand. Nevertheless, she received an answer of her own, as the wind

kicked up and rattled the panes on the windows and thunder voiced its own pent up aggression to the universe alongside her. For a moment, it felt like this world, this terrible, magicless domain, had embraced her rage and was decrying the injustice of it all. Sunset could feel the bubbling, searing knot of violence clawing its way up from inside her, until it had nowhere to go but out and all she wanted was to turn the



furious pain inside on someone else... goaded by the lurking tempest and her own raw frustration at having to always keep it in. Her face twisted as the shadows jerked in the blue-white flash from a proper bolt of lightning that illuminated the world in a noon bright snapshot, and when the thunder began its own bestial roar this time, she met it with a violent, shrill scream of pure equine hatred, a shrieking, hellish sound of challenge that would have made even a stallion the size of Celestia herself step back in fear, and followed through with a fist slamming full force into the wall.

Pain lanced up her arm, communicated through the knuckles of that malformed paw that humans called 'hands'... It felt *good*, satisfying some deeply visceral itch, an urge to act and vent her anger on a target, to cause pain, even if it was only to herself. Sunset pulled her lips back fully, and screamed again, pounding her fist savagely into the drywall over and over, each time with more force and fury, until she existed in an addictive loop of rage-violence-pain-satisfaction-pleasure, one that did not end until her hand finally broke through the drywall to the insulated space beyond.

Only then did Sunset stop, panting like she'd run a marathon and every muscle trembling like a plucked guitar string. Her hand throbbed, a dull pain that she barely registered, and tears dripped to the floor in time with the splattered sounds of fat, cold raindrops hitting the window beside her. It was all she could do to breathe, and stagger to collapse on her couch rather than the wood beneath her feet.

For a time, she existed in that spent daze, in a space where her own ragged breaths tearing through her airways competed with the staccato sound of the rain with its undercurrent of growling thunder.

It wasn't *fair*.

It should have been *hers*.

She had been the one who did everything demanded of her for years, who had pushed herself to the breaking point and then beyond, over and over again. It was Sunset who had set records and shattered expectations and clawed her way to the top of her class. Sunset who had been worthy of being the personal protege of the Princess of the Sun...

...and it had never been enough.

No matter how hard she had tried, it had not been good enough for Princess Celestia. Sunset had always failed some hidden expectation, some goal post that for some reason, seemed obvious to her teachers, her classmates, the palace staff, to everypony in Equestria except Sunset Shimmer.

Sunset Shimmer had *never* been enough...and she never would be. Not now, that Celestia had the pupil who had somehow succeeded in every way Sunset had failed.

A pupil who had passed the tests.

A pupil who had understood the hidden expectations.

A pupil worthy of Ascension, of being elevated to stand at Celestia's side... in a space Sunset had once dreamed would be hers.

Had she ever even stood a chance? Or had it all been a pathetic, impossible dream crafted by a delusional filly who wanted to matter?

A filly who now mattered even less, forgotten in a world of magicless bipeds. Had Celestia even really noticed she'd left? She'd replaced her quickly enough.

Exhaustion like she'd never felt before crept over Sunset, a soul-deep cold that sought to drag her down. Did *anything* matter anymore? Ruling the school had been a challenge at first, but now it was just... effort and frustration, hours spent each week manipulating idiots and sycophants to dance to her tune. Acing her classes while absorbing as much advanced human knowledge as she could get her hooves on had all been part of her plan to return through the portal and finally prove herself to Celestia—maybe they weren't magic spells, but television and computers were marvels, and they were only the obvious human inventions that she had learned about. Now the terrible aspects of that knowledge that Sunset had viewed as a noble sacrifice on her part to bring back the useful things were nothing but scars burned into her memory as horrific images and inconceivable numbers that human history was rife with. Every accomplishment and milestone she had made in this realm now felt like a waste... more failures on top of the old.

Maybe she should just give up, stop fighting a battle she had always been destined to fail.

Lightning flashed, practically on top of her loft, and a terrible, explosive boom of thunder snarled in its wake. The air around her crackled with static that made her hairless human hide prickle with goosebumps...

So that's it then? part of her whispered. After everything, you're just going to lay down and give up? What happened to 'Sunset Shimmer doesn't surrender to anypony?'

A flicker of frustration reignited, pushing back the draining sensation of being tired beyond description, and Sunset clawed her way to her feet and then to the

bathroom to wash her face. "...it's not surrendering..." she muttered, splashing cold water on her face.

Liar.

Blue-green eyes lifted to stare at her reflection in the dim bathroom lighting, water droplets making their way down her face and making her curling forelock sag, plastered to her forehead between her brows. She was a liar, wasn't she? Giving up now? Even thinking about it....

Her fingers clenched on the cold countertop. "No... I just... I need a *plan*. Some way to solve my problems...to prove Celestia wrong. Show her that I am ten times the mare that little purple runt trotting at her hocks is...that *she should have chosen me!*"

She would show her replacement too. Show her that she was nothing compared to Sunset—take all the things she'd learned here and take that mare's life apart until she felt the way Sunset had just a few minutes prior: a failure abandoned to her fate and being devoured by despair.

Sunset just needed a plan...a brilliant one, to take that pretender's stolen power back for herself.

But how?

Several concepts were examined and just as quickly discarded while the redhead scrubbed her face and hands, washing away tears from the former and blood from the scraped skin of the latter. Annoyed, she stomped back to the couch, intending on alleviating that emotion by ordering take-out and forcing some pimply faced delivery boy to have to navigate the storm to cater to her desire for a hot meal she didn't have to cook. Shuffling through the scattering of take-out menus on her coffee table, she had just about settled on Chinese when a different kind of advert caught her eye.

It was the flier for the Fall Formal.

On it was a faceless girl in a fancy gown dipping her head as she was crowned, words arc'ing around her like drifting leaves: '*Autumn's Enchantment: Fall for the Magic!*' Along the bottom third of the page was the dance info and instructions on how to sign up as a contender for the title of Fall Formal Princess.

She stared at it, remembering the sight of a different crown being placed on a pony's head in a coronation. Blinking, she imagined herself accepting another crown for dance royalty—practice, she had told herself every time she did it, for the real

thing in Equestria. The mental images blurred over the visual in front of her eyes, until she saw her human form, dressed for the dance, being crowned with the very Element of Magic that her replacement had been given.

A smile began to curl the edges of her lips. Perhaps she could use her various problems to solve one another, in one last, final plan before she was gone from this Tartarus-pit of a realm for good.

Abandoning the couch and her brief thoughts of *lo mein*, Sunset moved to her desk and grabbed her big black sketchbook. She flipped to a clean page and began drawing from memory, doing her best to fill in and recreate what she had seen upon that new upstart alicorn's brow. It didn't need to be exact, of course, just close enough to fool them for a few hours—long enough for her to swap one for the other and escape back to the human side of the portal.

It took almost no time, her hand flying frantically over the page, for the details to take shape in pencil—the six sided gem, the curls of gold, all rendered with a mixture of longing and loathing, then filled with basic blocks of color and labeled with notes about the rough dimensions.

Staring back at her was a fairly accurate recreation of the Element of Magic. Something she could get made 'for the dance'... probably with gratitude by that obnoxious pink menace if Sunset put on a show of being willing to pay for it as her contribution to the dance committee, couching the offer in simpering flattery about how hard they worked and how she just wanted to do her part.

Stupid Pinkie Pie would eat that up with a spoon.

That covered a decoy Crown of Magic... and it worked out—the dance was scheduled on the final day the portal would be open. She would have only a few days to work with... and she needed to make every second count. "...now where did I put those books on the Elements of Harmony?" the former unicorn muttered.

The wind howled its answer, rattling the window panes and sending cold rain to lash against the side of the building like hail. Ignoring it, Sunset began writing out the details of her new plan. It wasn't as simple as waltzing through and snatching the crown off the purple mare's head...that would never work. She had to be cunning, and made a list of all the details she needed to get sorted first, like where the new Princess slept and if her crown was kept in her room like Celestia's regalia. That would be a challenge, but learning the guard rotations would make up for it by being easy. There were only so many variants of those patrol schedules and she had memorized them as a filly so she could sneak around after hours.

She would have to go at night, and muffle her hooves. Sunset wrote a reminder to brush up on that and dig out her old cloak from the bottom of her saddlebags. The dark gray fabric would hide her sunny colored coat in the darkness and shadows better. A lockpicking spell was a must... but better to also bring a set of the much higher quality human lockpicks that she could order from the internet. Just in case.

Timing was going to be the tightest part of it all. Sunset would still need enough time with the Element in the human world to overcome its bond to the upstart and harness the power for herself. She would need as many hours as she could squeeze for that... so stealing the crown as close to the portal's opening as possible was paramount.

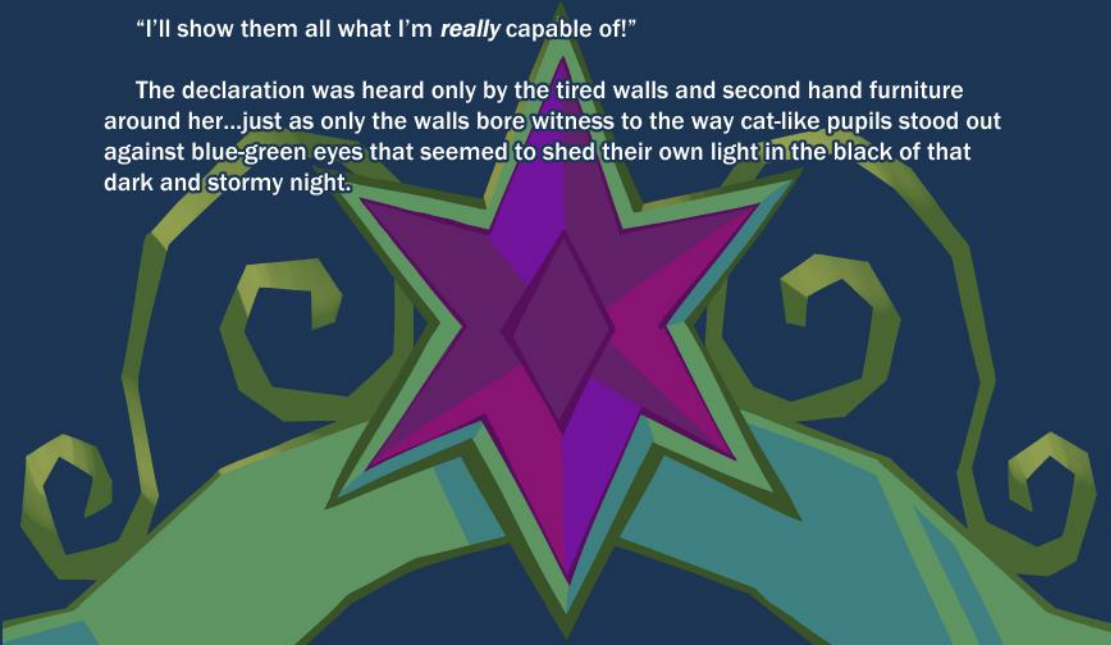
Contingencies and side notes, secondary plans and questions she still needed answers to soon spilled over onto extra pages, until she was laughing softly to herself over a veritable book's worth of scattered papers. "It's perfect," she murmured nastily to herself, running a finger over the six pointed star in the image of the Crown. "Soon you'll be mine, and the princess will see her mistake! They'll *all* see..."

She began gathering up the pages into a neat stack. "I'll show them," Sunset hissed to the empty air.

Thunder cracked and behind it, something burst. A moment later the power failed in the loft and across the entire block. The teenager paid it no mind, her grin savage and twisted as she continued muttering to herself as lightning flashed like a strobe light outside her window.

"I'll show them all what I'm *really* capable of!"

The declaration was heard only by the tired walls and second hand furniture around her...just as only the walls bore witness to the way cat-like pupils stood out against blue-green eyes that seemed to shed their own light in the black of that dark and stormy night.

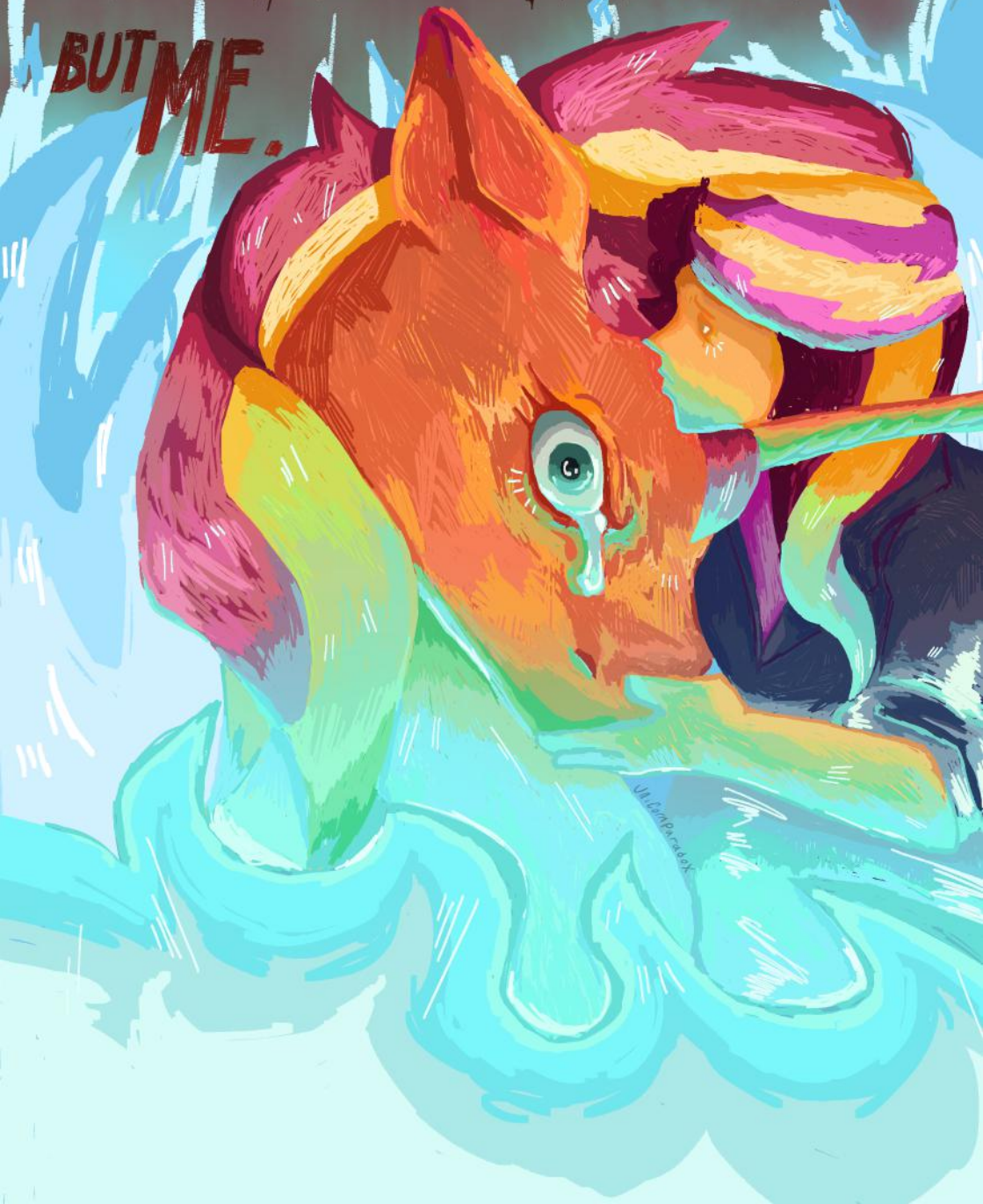


at last

more power
than i could

even imagine.

HOW I ADORE YOU, PRINCESS.
THIS COMES SO EASY FOR EVERYONE
BUT ME.



i can start again.



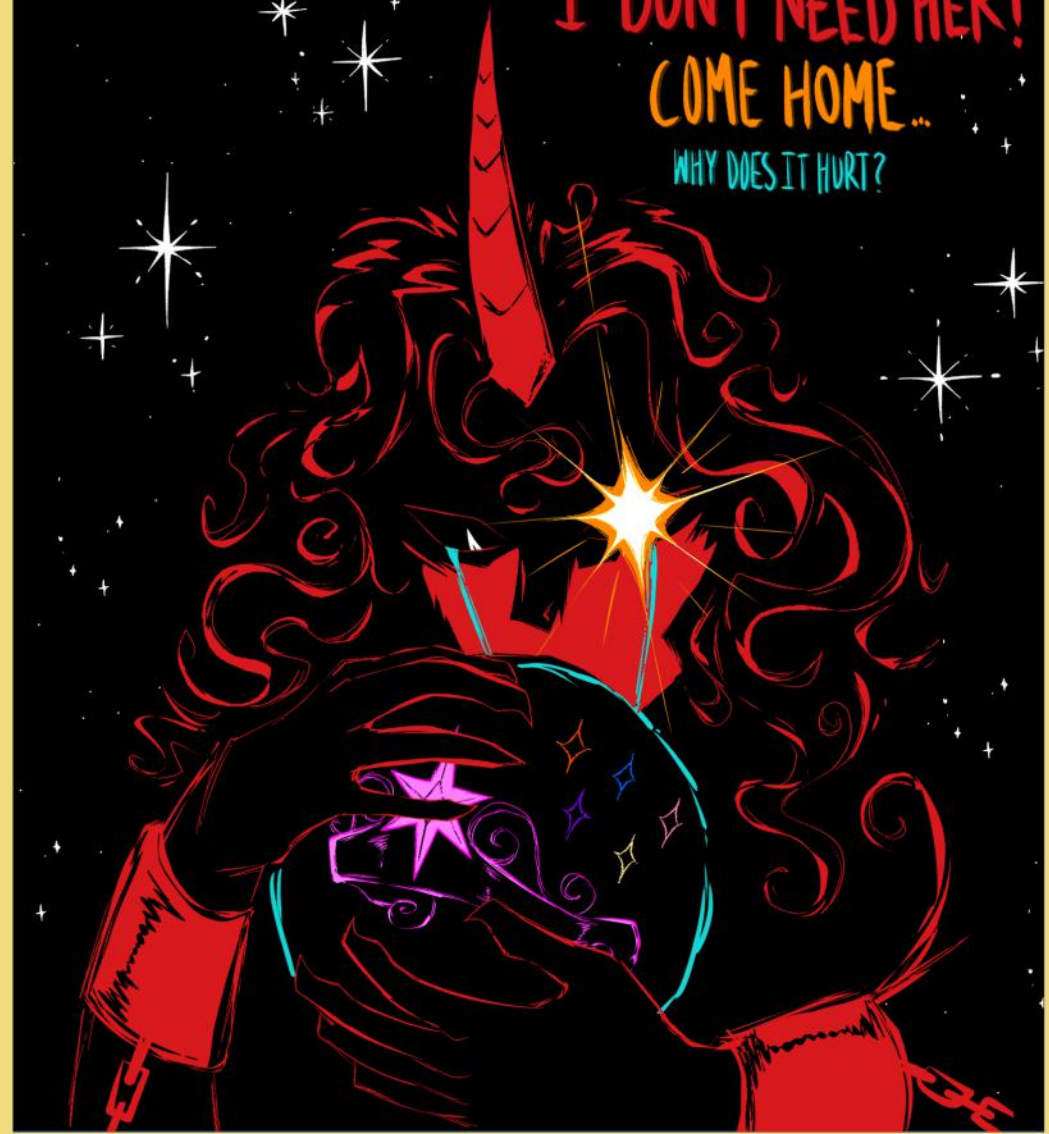
I WAS MEANT FOR MORE!

THIS IS NOT THE WAY...

I FAILED...

I DON'T NEED HER!
COME HOME...

WHY DOES IT HURT?





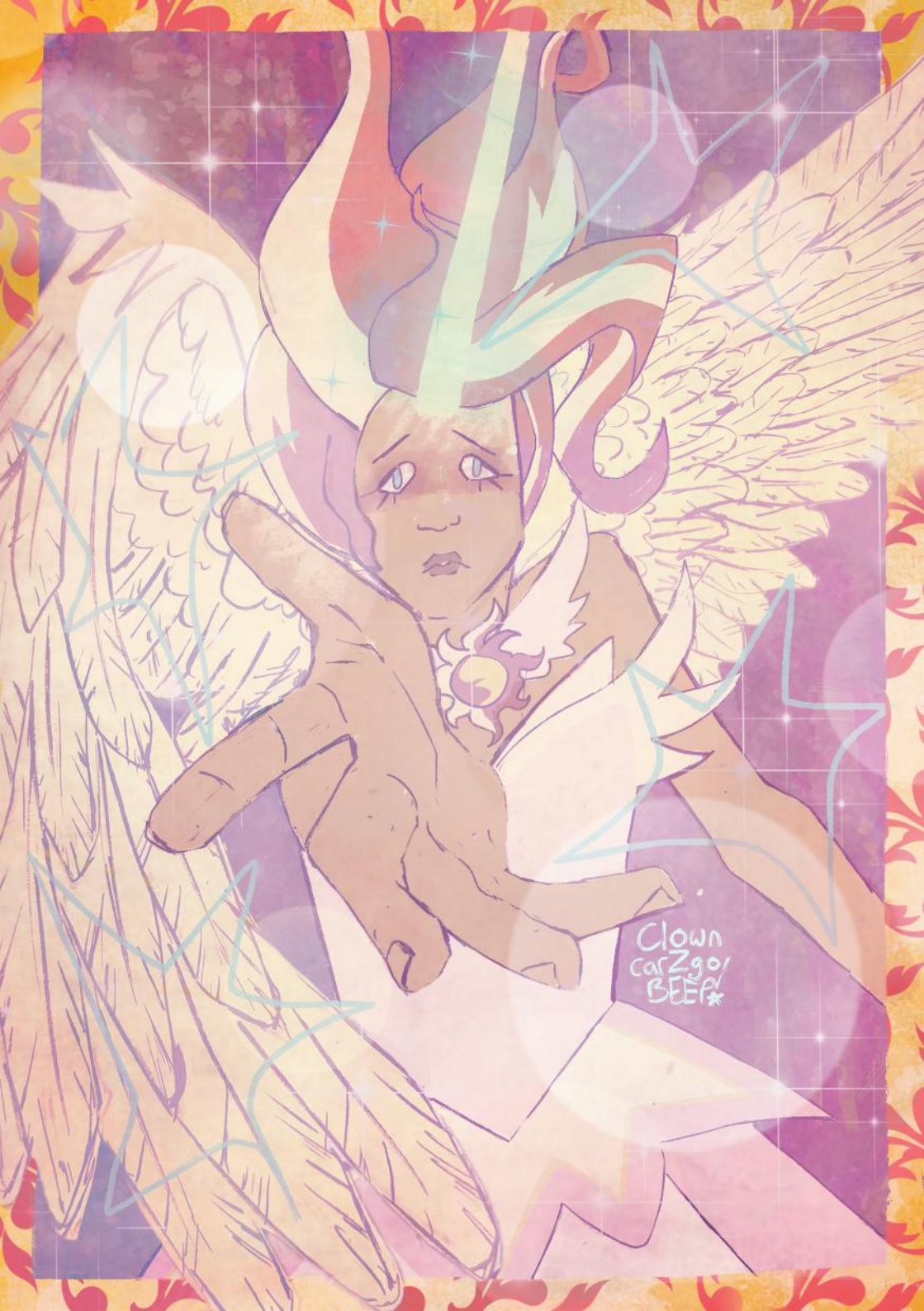


don't be
afraid of
walls coming
down,

you'll figure it out.



FLOOPYLODNER



Clown
carZgo/
BEEP*



I want to matter. To mean something.

To you.



To me.

Please.







HURRY UP SUNSET! WE'RE GONNA MISS THE TRAILERS, THEY'RE THE BEST PART OF THE MOVIE!



RELAX, I JUST NEED TO FILE THIS PICTURE THEN WE CAN GO!



HUH..?

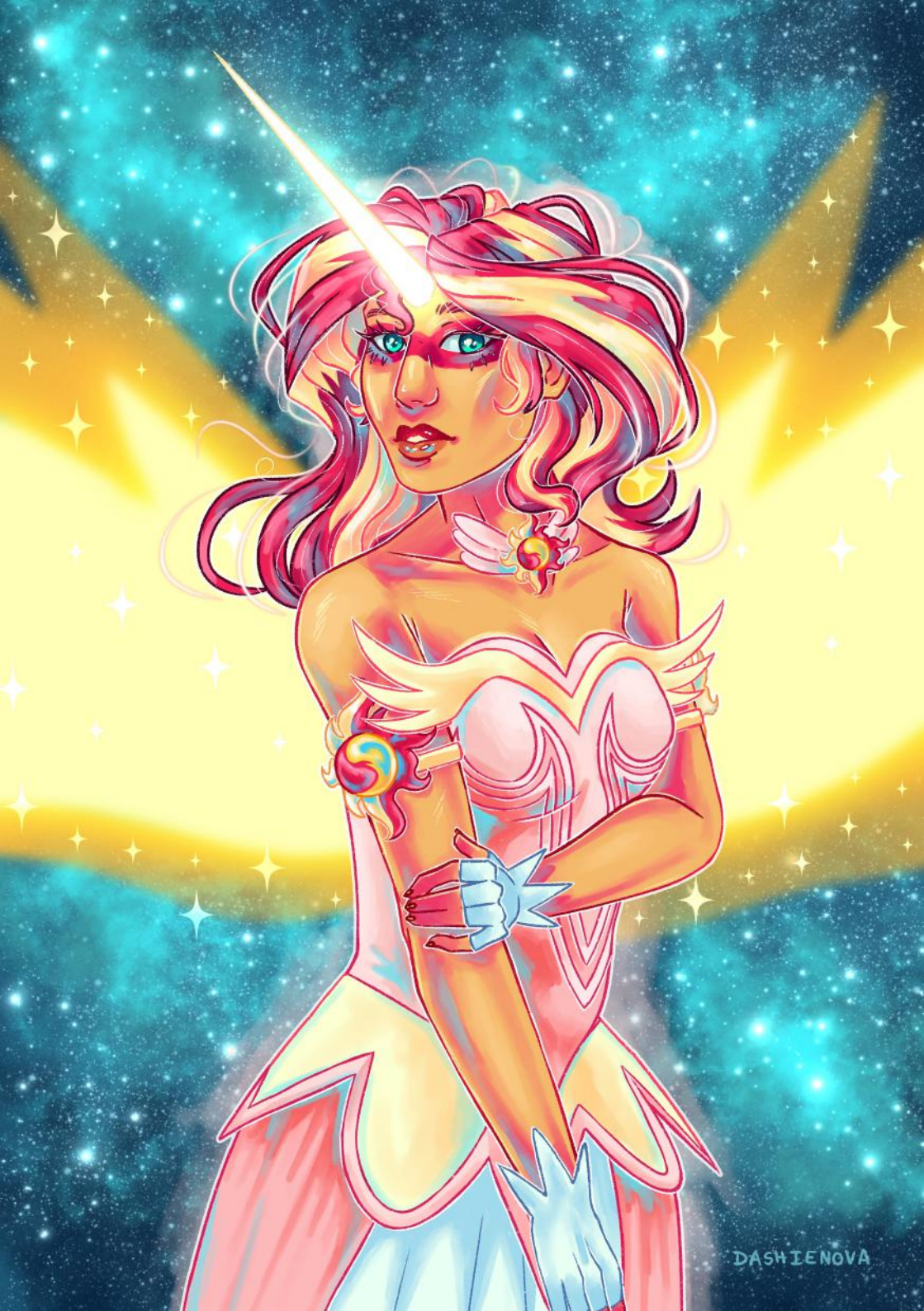


WOW, I LOOK SO...

...DIFFERENT



EW, WHAT THE HELL WAS UP WITH MY HAIR AT THE SPRING FLING.





All in the details

written by Redhoodie21 art by egg0att

Still and breathless January. Sluggishly rousing awake from winter's embrace, fruitlessly enticing all who brave it to stay under their covers as frost creeps up windows and swells inside walls. Yet the doing always needs to be done, and none were more aware than those within Canterlot.

Weather teams worked over time into double digits, both in the sky and on the ground. They were in the thick of the winter now, with no time to dawdle on excess holiday cheer.

The snow needed to fall, the clouds to gather, even guiding wisps of wind took hours at a time. Everything had to be picturesque and perfect for the Princess's home.

The castle was held to much the same, if not higher, standard. Because every diplomat, courier, distant kings and queens, consorts and princes, who walked through those doors expected perfection that only the living embodiment of the sun could give them. And that went double for what went on their plates.

The royal larder was stacked high with dry goods, crackers, dried fruits and jams, cheese wheels of all shades in teetering towers, breads and yams, pickles and eggs; the royal kitchen had everything and more than you could imagine.

Imported teas and still ripening coffee

beans, freshly pressed olive oil from Saddle Arabian trees, lacquered, honeyed gradient liquor from Crystal Empire's breweries, and, of course, apples, pears, pumpkins of all kinds freshly brought from Canterlot fields.

Anything the Princess even thought of craving her chefs could make it within the hour at any hour. And the same privilege carried over to her royal student. Even if the royal chefs detested that certain *privilege*.

It was late, it was so late it was early. The sun had dried up into the moon hours ago, yet Canterlot Castle still thrummed with begrudging activity, the heart of which lay not in its court, but its stomach, the kitchen.

A small pile of crockery dripped long yawns of water into a puddle in a sink, bits of grease and food encircled the drain. Spoons, forks, pots and pans, tangled their steel arms every which way, as the quiet *plink, plink, plink* of water snored away.

Rows upon rows of granite stoves and sun-bricked laid ovens were dormant, picked clean of ash and coal ages ago, yet tucked into one corner a dimly lit fire simmered. Huddled with only coughs and grunts as company as a lone cook fed the flames with another push of charcoal.

They were a footman in the kitchen. No grand title, no shouting orders. A grunt who did the dirty work that the real chefs didn't want to do, which included making the *brat's* midnight snack. Working in the royal

kitchen was meant to be an honor. Something their parents could brag about to aunts, uncles, random waiters. But they were little more than a glorified babysitter to an ungrateful student who couldn't even find the time to thank them.

They huffed out in anger. No use getting riled up, they thought, beginning work on the meal requested of them.

A fat slice of fresh, hot bread smeared evenly on one slice with red pepper dotted mayonnaise. Soft and airy, with a chewy crust that crumbled into a sour tang.

A crispy, brown-butter kissed egg, still sizzling and popping with mouth-burning heat. Topped with fat flakes of sea-salt and dustings of black pepper. The evening-orange yolk breaks against the bread, oozing down the side and pooling underneath the sandwich.



Stacked and layered with juicy red saturated kimchi, still teeth-grindingly crunchy and tangy on the cusp of being sour. Blooms of spice drenched every nook and cranny, black sesame seeds litter like leaves on a pond on pockets of oil and carrot-red brine.

Connecting these two halves was freshly sliced pieces of cheese, bubbling on the edges of the plate, melted just right to get that perfect pull between tongue and teeth.

A mastercraft of cuisine, worthy of the princess herself, the chef figured. Not that it mattered.

With a sigh they put the sandwich on a silver platter, and pushed it out the door to a dozing maid. They felt bad waking her, but with a yawn and nod she was off to Sunset's chambers, and they could finally sleep, at least for a few hours.

The halls were quiet. Guards patrolled in murmurs, horns alight and wings steady for invisible attackers. She trudged on, swallowing yawn after yawn, not bothering to fix her uniform as she wandered into slowly deserting halls. By the time she reached Sunset's room she hadn't seen a guard for hours. Who would be so dumb as to attack the princess's prized pupil in her own home? Everyone knew what she was capable of.

The maid knocked once. Then twice. She raised her hoof for a third before stopping. She looked at the clock, three a.m.

She pinched her brows and dropped the plate outside on the foot of the student's door, consequences be damned.

It was still there, uneaten, by morning.



The world was a pale, dusty, orange hue, so thick you couldn't see the clouds it descended from. Claps of chalky fog, a mix of snow and breath, slowly fogged her view, enclosing her on all sides by walls of falling white.

It's silent. Dead. No birds chattering on tree tops, no bugs humming in the grass. It was cold and it was empty. Not even the hush of her breathing broke the soundless air. Only the occasional bump of cars from the highway echoed to her ears, hidden in flurries of milk-tooth ice.

The walls closed in further with every step. What once was two houses visible swiftly became one, then a driveway, then just the road underneath her feet. Stretching on for what could have been miles on either side of her pristine prison.

Not even street lamps dared glow from underneath their winter coats. Their bulbs long since hibernating inside their iron walls.

Dead birds huddled on corners, sad sacks of feather and dust crammed together on doorways and windowsills. Piles of them. Piles of flocks of every shade and color stacked high on smothered welcome mats and outdated holiday decorations. Slowly tucked further and further under fresh blankets of snow.

It was not a torrent. It was not sleet. It did not crash down, setting off car alarms and clogging chimneys. It was calm. Steady. Lazily drifting in the air until settling with the same sureness of a dying dog resting one final time on his favorite spot. Inevitable. Indomable. Welcomed in the home of death that is suburbia.

Her feet burned against the slush of ice

and snow, like stepping on to a tackle box of fish hooks barefoot.

She wandered the streets, watching the way her breath came out in ribbons of dove-wings, from an unfamiliar mouth on an unfamiliar face. Her cheeks burned raw as she walked to the neon-lit building that sat squat on what she assumed was a street corner.

Ducking around the side, Sunset peered through the window to get her first live look at this world's inhabitants, and how she could blend in with them.

The man sat on a rolling chair, leaned back and occasionally coughing and grunting as he readjusted himself. He was fat and hairy, face hair thick with black curls over his cheeks and under his nose. Even his eyebrows looked like two fuzzy caterpillars squirming with concentration on his face.

He was mid aged if Sunset had to guess, late thirties, maybe early forties by the crow-feet hugging his eyes and mouth. And he had that same disgusting habit of turning pages by licking a hoof first that Celestia had.

She fought the urge to gag at the germs he was not only spreading but *ingesting* by such thoughtless acts. She had to focus damnit, even on a protesting stomach. She would fix this, she just needed to get all the details on this one person, *man*, who was blocking her way to a full meal.

Her stomach rolled inside her, kicking her ribs, telling her to hurry up.

Biting her lip until she tasted copper, Sunset watched as the last of some bumbling foal trio skipped out of the store and started chattering as they climbed into one of those growling metal abominations called cars.

Crouched behind the dumpster, Sunset waited until the beast of a contraption slowly rolled past and down the street.

Waiting just a moment longer until it faded completely into the wall of white, she slowly, ever so slowly, crawled out from behind her cover. Hissing between her teeth at the strike of pain that shot through her, as her joints had locked up from the cold digging into her concrete-and-salt kissed knees.

Stumbling up on two feet, she steadied herself on the frosted, advertisement smeared glass leading to the door. Taking each step carefully, yet trying to not look down so she'd blend in more.

Moving towards the door she almost jumped as it opened on its own, but kept calm and swiftly walked inside with the confidence of the sun fueling her every step.

The man behind the counter briefly looked up from his well-worn sudoku paperback to see who had entered the store, before returning back to his game with only a deep seated grunt as greetings.

Sunset could see the way he gripped his little leaflet of puzzles hard, the purple of the cover blending into the taut fat of his fingers. His pencil had scarcely moved since she had entered and unless the page was all zeros she doubted he was actually paying it any real attention.

Even if she only had the beginning of the written language here down, it was certainly much more angular than this man's loose penmanship implied, she knew she was being watched, and judged. The man was probably itching for a reason to call the local guards on her. She got that same salt-soured look by the nobles in Canterlot all the time.

She had been in convenient stores before, back in Equestria, but they were nothing like this.

Aisle upon aisle of pre-packaged goods in brightly colored bags, cans, boxes, armored with labels and prices; hundreds of drinks lined the back, fizzing with colors that seemed inedible; oranges that threatened to burst at the navel, with unnatural plumpness; pears and apples browned from the core, leaking the yellowing puss of their innards directly onto the shelf.

And the *lights*. The lights buzzed and hummed way too bright, and made her sweat from the white heat they poured down her.

Then the smells hit. Greasy *meat* products sizzled a sickening mixture of salty rubber and copper no matter where she hid in the store.

She huddled further into herself, trying to ignore the feeling of sweat sticking to her skin and clothes and hair and hands and behind her eyes and-

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes, and recentered herself, blocking the smell of meat and sweat and everything wrong in this store, this place, far, *far* from her mind.

She resettled inside the thing that was her body, blocking her senses as much as possible, coating everything she touched, smelt, saw, in a thin layer of film to keep her from losing her head. She was watching herself like a passenger inside her mind.

Sunset picked up a bag, crinkling in her grip, and looked at the picture of carrots, cabbage, and all manner of other vegetables under what she assumed to be the label. It looks appealing enough, if a bit tacky and doctored, but beggars can't be choosers.

She grabbed another. Something with nuts and chocolate? She looked back at the shopkeeper. Still looking at his booklet. She looked back down at the damnable pukably bright candy bar. Then just as quickly as a rabbit gets snared in a net, she shoved it between her waistband and grabbed another so it didn't seem so suspicious.

She dawdled around the store, picking up this and that between rows of beer and gas, lures and ammo, chili-cheese dogs and sad, limpy pizza, until a sizable pile of snacks stacked up on the counter.

Just on the edge, opposite the register, was a wheel of fake cheddar sweating directly onto the counter, unwrapped and unrefrigerated. Jagged chunks appeared ripped out savagely, half-hand, half-knife, with these miniature claw-like limbs. Sunset wrinkled her nose just at the sight of it.

"That'll be..." the man droned on for a moment, finger tapping in some numbers into the cash register. "28.68," he said, looking up expectantly at Sunset.

"Ah, right... the... payment," Sunset tried, not knowing if the currency here was still bits, not that it would matter since she hadn't brought any with her.

She patted around her clothes and pockets, hoping she looked naturally forgetful. Back home- back in Equestria, she hadn't needed to pay for anything out of pocket in years. She could either send someone to fetch it or put it on the crowns tab. The shopkeepers knew her face well enough to steer clear of asking for it, and if they didn't she made sure they learned that swiftly.

But here she didn't have that benefit. And the growing look on the man's face was starting to make her sweat even more.

Time was growing longer, seconds into minutes, minutes into hours, Sunset kept patting her pockets but knew it was much too long to be seen as forgetful.

"Hold on a moment, kid," the shopkeeper suddenly asked. He grabbed one of the red bags and shook it slightly for effect. "Think these uh," he quickly checked the front to see what it was, "skittles had a recall recently. Lemme check the back to see if we got a fresher order." He asked, more to himself.

Sunset watched every single step he took until he went into the back room and waited for a second longer until she looked back down at the pile of paper and plastic on the counter.

Mind blank and still shaking from anxious adrenaline, Sunset quickly looked around the check-out counter for some kind of bag to carry everything in, but only found some sort of plastic sheets. The man wouldn't be long now, she looked between the door and the food. She licked her lips, tasting salt and cracked skin.

'*Fuck it,*' she decided, leaning over the counter and grabbing an armful of snacks before running out the auto-opening door. A high shrill beeping followed behind, some kind of protection charm she had tripped after not paying.

She didn't care though. Running, almost continuously falling forward to get away with her haul. The guards were almost certainly called by now, but she would be long gone by the time they arrived.



The diner sat on the edge of nowhere, close enough to suffer the arterial blockage of five pm traffic, yet far enough that no other buildings surrounded it. Only trees, dirt,

gravel, and a horde of ten-ton trucks smattered in all sorts of garishly obnoxious advertisements.

Pine trees rustle outside, sending crows and bees echoing into their canopies, while the rank stench of burnt rubber and gasoline cut clean through the Everfree forest. The slow drizzle of rain had peppered the area all day, staying only for a few minutes before shifting under the covers of the clouds and sending the droplets away.

The diner itself was old, built with real wooden logs and slowly outgrown over time, but like a favorite shirt of a stubborn kid, the owners clearly refused to expand. Instead, they put a menagerie of tables and chairs, some second hand rust buckets, some chipping wooden stools paired with sleek modern console tables, all around the "patio" out front. Umbrellas not included.

Inside, tin pipes and a wrought iron stove churned a blazing, sweaty heat that settled in all the awkward places of your skin. Behind ears, sticking napes to shirts, it made the room so hot you could feel sweat behind your eyeballs.

Moth-eaten light bulbs spilled out a brandy brown light across patrons and cooks alike. Submerging the restaurant in a hazy, beer bottle tint.

In every booth the cracked laminate pinches a little extra yellow in the wallpaper. Teeth chatter and clatter overlapped a din of knives pulling across porcelain. While a cigarette fog ghosted above ochre-aged coffee pots and lipstick kissed mugs.

All across faces were warmed in a honey-glazed glow, while licks of teenage phone light danced across pinched cheeks and dimpled eyes. So tightly packed together in faded leather booths, faces smooshed in full body hugs, hands reaching out,



grabbing fistfuls of "how are yous" and "it's so nice to have you here," and "did you see who cousin May brought?" All stuffed together like over-proofed rolls baked in an oven, smeared with shiny, sweaty cheer.

On one side of the bar, a lone truck driver sits mulling over a plate of steaming eggs, his mind on the road yet to be traveled.

On the other side, a middle-aged couple, already breaking-in their smile lines, tucked into a booth, laughing. Their arms animated over their oversized sandwiches, dripping egg, bacon, and hot sauce together on lips and table.

A lone waitress carried a lukewarm coffee pot, carrying the smell of oven-hot air thick with the dank earth scent of coffee grounds. Her shoes squeaked against the linoleum as she walked in and out of the kitchen's porthole.

The rain picked up again, rumbling like cars overhead.

The waitress stops in front of the corner table, wordlessly filling Sunset's coffee mug for the third time that morning.

Sunset nodded her head once as thanks,

taking in that first great exhale of coffee hitting the mug, flooding around her in a steamy cloud, telling her to relax her shoulders, her back, unclench her muscles and enjoy the smell of morning.

Unfortunately, she couldn't.

She peered over her mug to study her targets. If she wanted to have a real shot at her plans she would need to do what she does best; sucking up to authority figures.

Mr Sentry was an upright, neck-tie too-tight, sort of fellow. He had white sheen around his pallid hair, showing his waning age in just the right light. He wore a primly pressed suit, with a checkered button up underneath. His mustache was bushy and grey, and he always looked two seconds away from needing CPR.

Mrs Sentry, in contrast, was plump and pleasant. Rosy cheeked and grinning, with just the hint of grey teasing her hair. She always wore a smile and kept candy within her purse, alongside her current Stephoofen King novel.

With her teenage son out of the house most days and her husband working, missus Sentry had started her own true-crime podcast within her kitchen. It was very successful.

Then there was Flash. Oh, sweet, kind, gullible Flash. He was the perfect pawn for her game; popular, connected, weak-willed, and easily manipulated. Not to mention he seemed more than willing to ignore her *less-than-human* hiccups and kept them to himself. Yes, he made a fine boyfriend. For the time being. His car was a nice benefit as well.

From what Sunset had gathered from movies, 'meeting the parents' was an important romantic ritual that helped

establish relationships between humans. It was a sign of something serious, though she had no intention of that.

Once she'd exhausted all his usefulness, Sunset planned to drop Flash faster than a pegasus with one wing. His parents didn't need to know that of course.

The waitress strode over, clearly not wanting to be there, and refilled Mr Sentry's coffee cup, not daring to break the silence that had been instilled since they sat down.

The aged-lacquered coffee pot sent golden rays of light across the table. Brown, almost black granules of coffee floated lazily on the surface, spinning round and round, like the surface to an entirely new planet.

A small tin of cream and a loose bowl of sugar were pushed towards the edge of the table, almost tipping over from the way Sunset constantly readjusted herself. The sugar still held a star pattern from her fingers running through the grains like sand in an hourglass.

Swirling mugs puffed out steam like old men on stoops. Droops of golden honey and sunny-syrup slowly oozed across crispy, saucers of hashbrowns, three fat slices of fatty bacon, partnered with two runny eggs that still sizzled and popped.

A butter melted biscuit and golden burnt toast hovered on the edge of the table. Sweating red diner cups filled to the brim with honeyed sweet tea and straws.

Flash anxiously fiddled with the small packets of jam, stacking and unstacking them, while sneaking peeks at his parents. His plate remained untouched.

"So," Mr Sentry gruffly began readjusting himself to appear more inviting but failing to do so. "You're the girl who broke our window."

"*Oh my god.*" Flash groaned, covering his face with his hands.

Sunset barked out a sharp laugh, leaning back in the booth with the sure fire confidence of someone who knew they would get off scot-free from a crime.

"In my defense sir," she almost gagged saying that, "you had just grounded him from his phone."

"After he pulled the fire alarm in the boy's bathroom during gym, which I heard, was orchestrated by *you*." He scrunched up his stache, dried bits of egg clung like fruits to it.

Sunset laughed again, even as Flash cringed further and further next to her. "Guilty as charged. Sir." She added as an afterthought.

"So why, on God's green Earth, would I ever let *you date*, let alone be *near*, our son?"

Mrs Sentry sipped her coffee as she patted her husband's hand the redder and redder he became in the face. "Dear," she set down her mug, "mind your anger, we don't want another cholesterol crash now, do we?"

Mr Sentry shook his head and murmured a quiet no.

Turning towards the subject of the conversation, Mrs Sentry talked gently, but with a stern force only a mother could give. "Sunny dear--"

"Sunset. Please." Sunset gritted back.

"Sunset, all we want is the best for our son," Mrs Sentry responded, reaching out to touch Sunset's hand. "And, well, we just aren't sure you're the best... influence to be around. Surely you understand?"

"Trust me, ma'am," Sunset leaned forward, snapping her hand away from Mrs. Sentry. "I am the best thing that will *ever* happen to Flash.



The stairs heaved and creaked like an old man rising from his chair. The wood sagged under each step and smelled like menthol cigarettes. Landlord white walls yellowed on the edges like a sepia-loved letter kept safely hidden in a breast pocket.

The lightbulb outside Sunset's door flickered, exposed wires hung down from its neck, and the extension cable that kept it lit sparked a bit as she shimmed by it.

The door didn't open on the first turn, or the second. Boot first she rammed her shoulder into it. It burned like hell, already bruised and battered from her failed plans. The door opened.

The room was small. Small enough she could put her arms out wide and touch both sides. The walls were cracked, tinted black, and covered with her poor attempts at keeping her anger in check. Little pock holes, divets in the plaster and brick in the shape of her fists. They could tell the entire story of her life here.

On the left was the only window into her apartment, absolutely soaked in the cheapest white paint you could get, so much so you couldn't open it, trust her, she had tried.

Not that it mattered, the only thing on the outside were bars bolted into the building, which framed the most gorgeous view of a McDonalds caught between bureaucratic hell and a wrecking ball. Yet somehow still, buzzed a neon-yellow light right into her eyes at night.

A security measure, her landlord had told her, when asked about the bars. His glittering rolex watch and sweaty fingers told her more than enough.

Underneath it was her poor excuse of a kitchen. Two counters, cork peeling from its skin, a wood-paneled mini fridge she found on the side of the road, a hot plate she had rewired last winter, and a microwave she stole from a pawn shop. She was still proud of doing that.

On the right was the "living room" if you could call it that. A second hand, mud brown couch whose arm kept falling off, a coffee-ringed coffee table stacked high with dirty dishes, magazines, and a pair of controllers still connected to her gamecube. She looked away.

Less than half-a-foot away, was the tube TV she found in a dumpster, which was bigger than even her. It was raised on four cinder blocks that were barely level with the coffee table. It hummed with static snow, and buzzed in the droning silence of the apartment.

Sunset dropped her bag on the couch, and stood there. Taking it all in. Was this all she was worth? All she could achieve in this new world? A few posters and empty cans? She's the student of the *SUN* for Celestia's sake.

She paused at that thought, looking down at her hot plate. Was. She was the student of the sun. She wasn't anyone now. Not even good enough to mourn before getting a replacement. Tonight had shown that clearly.

She watched the faint spears of headlights clash underneath her window. As she listened, the hiss of the fridge blended into the growing static noise in her head. It was dark outside. The sun had set

hours ago. She felt cold. Like she hadn't ever left that crater.

Then suddenly, she was back.

A car was going off outside, a family tried to soothe a crying baby next door, her fridge hummed next to her hand. The smell of dinners echoed through the building's thin walls. A microwave went off, a tv played the news a few rooms over. Someone laughed. Someone jingled their keys in their door as they came home. Dew collected in the corners of her windows. Kids ran down the hall and their mother told them to slow down for her.

It was like she had been dreaming this whole time. Like she had blinders on and just remembered she could take them off. Like she had just been handed a pair of glasses and not realized she had been only seeing the shapes of life and not its details.

Without thought her body began moving without her.

It moved with her watching through its eyes like one daydreams out a car window. Both consciously hyper-aware of every brush of skin and yet disconnected from her mind as a whole.

Sunset's knees hit the floor with all the dead weight of her limbs. She was a cinder block in the bottom of a lake. Every inch of skin, every tiny bone, felt swathed with wool, causing each miniscule touch to feel like a stab with a needle.

Her spine tightened with the phantom feeling of wings. The scarred healed scars clawed from inside her. The veins in her head pulled taut against her skin, burned with the memory of that jagged horn that covered her eyes with blood the color of sin.

Seconds became minutes, minutes into



hours, hours into days. It took what felt like weeks for Sunset to raise her arm to the fridge. With a suctioned breath it swung open, casting a wide arm of light across her. The dim glow of the fridge spilled into the empty abyss around her. The harsh line split her face in two.

In a flurry of movement, driven by suppressed instincts, her arms swung like pendulums. Its hefty weight swung wildly in and out, in and out, the carcass of the fridge.

Her face smeared with bits of food; across her lips, her cheeks, dribbling down her chin, like a child who got into their mothers makeup.

Her mouth fell agape. Chunks of fleshy strawberry oozed down her face. Unknowingly and without care.

Her eyes, those glowing, headlight blue eyes, stare into the darkness like a car does to a deer. Snapping at every twitch of sound. Her ears try to twist with muscle memory movements.

In her hands, clutched in desperate pleading fists, a red blob of strawberries bleeds onto the tiles. Her fingernails, hands, both her wrists are drenched in red, bespeckled with white star like seeds. From a distance it could be mistaken for a heart.



The summer was too young to have a name. The sun flickered with heat like a lighter without a cigarette. The dying light tangled its fingers in her hair, making her upper lip sweat, dripping the taste of the flu on her tongue.

Sunset waited in silence. The click, click, of cars pattered home like watching a ceiling fan when it's too hot to think.

Her ears were still ringing from the battle. All around there was destruction. Flames extinguished with rubble, embers burned into ash, rival buses had driven away hours ago, yet teachers and students alike lingered. Bubbles of kids somehow still brimmed with school spirit, all smiles and cheer, even after the angel of death had passed over them once again.

Sunset's voice was raw with them, but adrenaline slowly turned to sluggish musings as the crowd thinned into dusk. Her smile ached and waned into a tired frown. Her back hurt, like a big bruise someone constantly kept poking at.

She didn't really remember what the nurse had said other than "rest" and "meal". Her head still throbbed with the feeling of her horn, it almost felt unnatural.

Twilight suddenly sat down next to her, slinging one arm around and glasses cracked on her nose. It wasn't *The Twilight* she knew, but it was her Twilight. In a way she supposed.

She didn't say a word as they watched the cars together. There was nothing they couldn't say that the other wouldn't understand.

Sunset dug into her pocket and pulled out a granola bar which looked more like a crinkled tissue paper of crumbs after the battle.

She offered it to Twilight without any words, not even looking next to her.

Twilight looked. Paused. Mind blank with thought. Before she took the offering and ate it without hesitation.



Summer was thick in the air, wringing sweat from brows, and melting away the memory of school on sidewalks. The sun bled across the city outskirts like a cherry stain on white shirt, with cheeks as ripe as apples leaning towards its gaze like sunflowers following its dying rays.

The forest reclaimed everything that once was its; vultures plucked pink with age built roosts in long forgotten trailers, still thick with the memory of humans, worms edged more and more into the road, eating away at the tar and paint, leaving behind a trail of dirt-slick airways, flowers, grass, roots and rocks bloomed like antlers popping open from the earth's skin, while rasp of crickets and katydids echoed wetly with the coming rain.

Trees shyly locked toes with one another, while fungi and coyotes alike practiced the resourcefulness of rot. The trees, some still sapling green, swayed with the ghost of axes, before the rip-roaring rage of human machinery suddenly blew by.

A matte black motorcycle tore across the countryside, smoothly purring through the sun-cut creases between the canopies before shifting back into the pleasant forest chill. Its rider reveled in the speed, even with a helmet covering her head the rush of wind pumped adrenaline in her veins until it throbbed red in her ears.

She swerved left and right, between and around potholes and debris. The forest bent to her will as she raced through it, and a part of her wanted to see how far she could truly push it, but she knew better now, and she had another reason to come down here than for an evening drive.

Sunset spotted the overgrown sign, sun bleached and sepia toned, it still read *Sweet Apple Acres half a mile to the right*, slowing down she turned onto a packed dirt road,

making sure to keep her bike within the tilled lines the Apple's truck had dug.

The cabin sat squat in the clearing, cradled on all sides by woods, with warmed ash-grey shingles drooped down its brow and two rusty red windows on its second floor and a brown stone chimney puffing steadily on the side. It looked like an old man with bristle brush stache, scrunching up his nose while he smoked.

Sunset pulled her bike to the side of Rarity's car, rolling to a stop as the sounds of laughter and crackle of fire reached her ears. The sweet summer scent of wood smoke was thick in the air.

"You made it!" Twilight exclaimed as she rounded the house from the backyard.

Without a word Sunset hopped off her bike and opened her arms, picking up Twilight as they collided, ending in a girlish giggling spin.

Sunset grinned, looking down at Twilight and holding as close as she could. "I made it," she whispered, the words brushed against Twilight's lips.

"Bout time you showed up, thought we'd have to send a search party out for ya." Applejack began as they stepped past the threshold into the backyard proper.

"I took the scenic route," Sunset shrugged off as they walked towards the others.

"Better hurry up and make a plate then, before Pinkie and Dash eat everything that is."

A very indignant gasp followed. "I would never eat all the food before Sunset had a chance!" Pinkie outlandishly protested, hand over her heart.

"I would." Rainbow Dash said between a mouthful of food.

Rarity, who had been walking around the table with a fresh plate of fried green tomatoes frowned at Dash's admission. "*Rainbow Dash!* That is not a very polite thing to do."

"But I *neeeeed* the calories Rarity. Gotta keep this figure up!" She ended by flexing her arm.

"Yeah Rarity," Sunset started, as she and Twilight settled into the picnic bench they had all squeezed together on. "She's gotta keep eating or else she won't win the pride flag look-alike contest."

Someone said something back, probably Rainbow but Sunset filtered all the noise out as soon as the first fried green tomato hit her mouth.

The crunch of still sizzling cornmeal crust melted into the tangy, almost-sweet, watery green tomato underneath. Followed by a stringy pull of supple mozzarella clung to her teeth soon after, soaking up the oil from the tomato whilst giving its own salty taste. Before the faint aftertaste of basil slowly drifted across her tongue, settling on her lips like a housecat in a sunbeam.

"That good Sunshim?" Rainbow asked teasingly.

"You have no idea," Sunset mumbled back, already taking her next bite.

"They don't got that in Equestria do they?" Applejack proudly huffed out. "Family recipe from my momma's side. Pinch of pear does wonders."

Twilight tilted her head like a dog not understanding a command. "Are you sure you should be telling us that? Aren't family

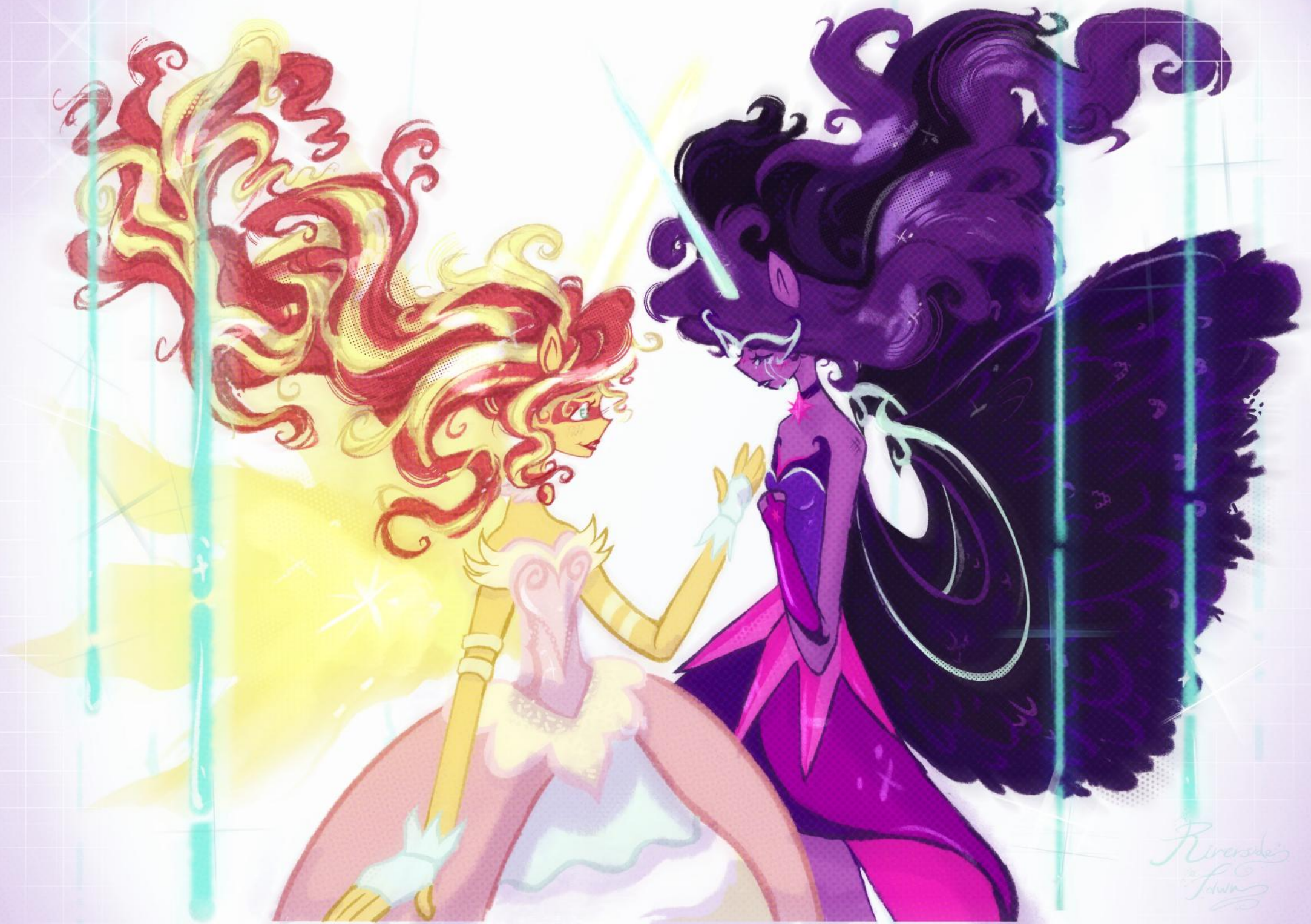
recipes supposed to be secret?"

"We took down demons together while havin' magical horse ears. If that doesn't make a family I don't know what does."

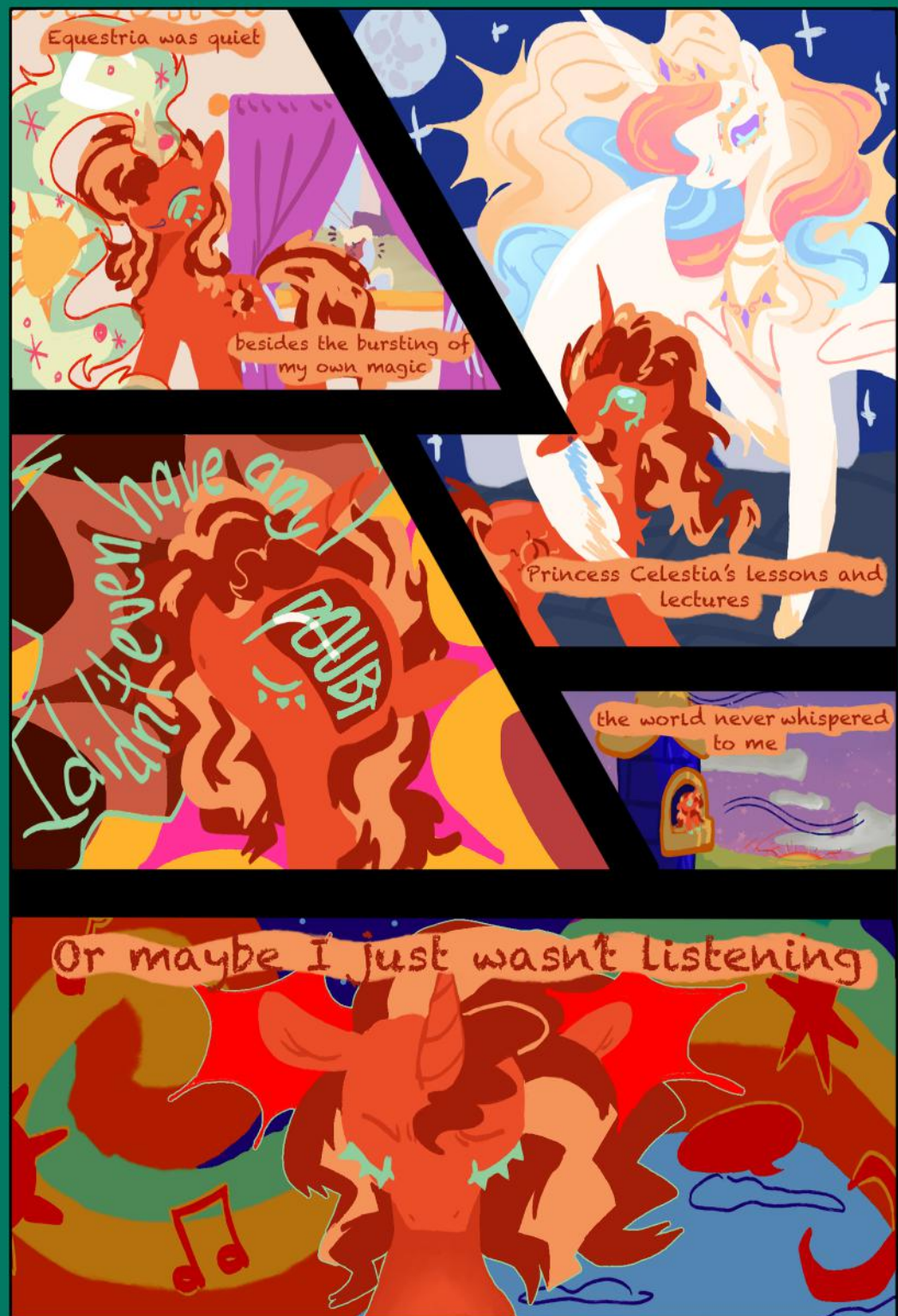
Sunset nodded, chuckling a bit. Family. She had never really thought about it since the formal and those terrible nights after. But it felt right. Weighty. Like turning a childhood ball over in a fist. Grown into, and worn in just the right places.

She looked around the table, at this family they made together, and smiled so hard it hurt her cheeks.

That night, she ate everything on her plate.



Riverside's
Edwin



Then I learned to listen for second chances

For whispers in the hallway



For someone
to tell me
I was doing
something right



Now I get to hear people sing
my praises

I get to listen to my
friends laughing together

That's not the
best thing
though-





THAT'S SUNSET SHIMMER!

It was right there
in front of me
Just too close for me to see

Sorry it had to be
this way...
Princess~

That's what I do...

...I keep us connected!

That's my girl...

Did you
say something?

Forget
about it...







Velleity

written by *spoopyjupi*

art by *horsegirlrehab*

The first thing that Sunset Shimmer noticed were the lights.

It was not the crippling nausea that kept her hunched on the ground, nor her new, freakish appendages that shook as they held her body up. It wasn't the buildings, larger than she had ever seen, the few stars in the night sky, or the strange feel in her body that something wasn't quite right.

No, it was the lights. The soft, orange lights shining through windows of a building she had never seen anything like before. It was square, so very square, with flat roofs and so many windows. The glow was almost blinding among the surrounding dark, and only then did Sunset look around.

Only then, did she realise who, or what, she was. She noticed her hooves - no, what are those? - her mane, her body. She didn't have a tail any longer, her snout was significantly smaller and flatter, and overall, she just didn't look *right*.

Sunset screamed.

It was strange, Sunset thought. Everything was strange.

The lights were so blinding that she could hardly see what was around her, although in an entirely different way from before. There were more of... whatever she was, bustling around her; these tall, two legged creatures that she could only compare to Discord, the Lord of Chaos, or specific species of dragon, though even they looked nothing alike.

She sat on what looked like a bed, but it was stiff, with a rough, white blanket. The walls were white, the floors white and shiny, and all the creatures wore white coats - clean, and pristine, with the occasional item poking out of a pocket, or pin on the lapel. Everything was white, white, white, and it was so

bright and harsh, and the creatures wouldn't stop talking to her - asking her name, where she was from, whether she was hurt - or prodding at her with cold metal or needles that hurt. She wanted so badly to push and hit and scream, but this body was so weak; muscles untrained, unused, and entirely unfamiliar to her. Instead, she sat, curled into a ball and pressed as close to the furthest edge of the bed she could. It was her only defense.

Sunset Shimmer was scared.

She was terrified, in fact, and overwhelmed, and so, so unsure.

Because, above everything else, the one person she wanted to escape from was standing right there - or, well, an approximation of her. She was like Sunset - herself, but in the form of one of these strange creatures. It took her a while to recognise her, but that colourful hair and regal demeanour was unmistakable.

Sunset Shimmer's teacher, mentor, and Princess, stood before her, expression... worried, maybe? She did not know how these creatures expressed worry, fear, sadness, happiness, or anything else, but her instincts told her it was worry painted across her face.

And that was, perhaps, strangest of all.

Princess Celestia worried for Sunset Shimmer.

It was laughable, in fact. *The Princess Celestia* worried for Sunset; the one who yelled, and restricted, and banished Sunset, all for daring to follow her ambitions. All for daring to follow exactly what Celestia had encouraged her to do from her fillyhood, from the first time she met the Princess and impressed her with her magic power. But, of course, once she started to learn real magic, Celestia stopped her. Because why would she ever support her prized student?

Tears began to pool in her eyes, and Sunset pulled closer into herself, burying her face.

But this wasn't her Celestia, not really. This Celestia looked at her with zero recognition and zero familiarity. She did not meet this Celestia when she was young, and she did not grow up learning from her. She did not spend every birthday, Hearth's Warming, or gala with this Celestia, and it was not this Celestia that betrayed her.

A small, very small, part of Sunset - one that she spent long burying deep within her - wished for a new start. This perfect opportunity; this squeaky clean, brand new slate that she could build from and get her beloved teacher back. She didn't know how she could do it, she didn't know anything in this world, but perhaps Celestia could teach her, again.

But, the bigger part of Sunset, the part that was angry, and vengeful, and upset, only saw this as an opportunity of power. This Celestia was not a Princess. It would not be treason to disobey her, to go against her command. This Celestia could not banish her from her castle, her city, to the edges of Equestria.

Sunset peaked out from above her strange, bony appendages. All the creatures here looked at her with a bizarre look in their eye. She had hardly ever seen it before, let alone directed at her. It was pity, she realised, as a creature in a blue smock smiled at her. They viewed her as a small thing, something sweet, something to be protected, something to feel sorry for. Something weak.

Her eyes travelled to Celestia, talking to creatures in an entirely different uniform - one that was dark and bulky, with thick belts that held strange appliances, and held themselves proudly, entirely unlike the white-coated creatures that seemed far too frazzled to keep their back straight and chest pushed forward. She told them she would be more than happy to host Sunset under her own roof while investigations took place, and Sunset squashed that small, kind part of her.

She knew exactly what she had to do to rise above her mentor.



Sunset Shimmer rubbed her eyes and ran her hands (as she quickly learned) down her face. She had been staring at the plain walls of this bedroom for what felt like hours, though was more likely something like fifteen minutes. Maybe it was hours. She didn't know, and she didn't particularly care.

Boxes were littered across the floor, not too many, not too few. Her entire new life was tucked away in these boxes, so small and insignificant.

She was happy that she was moving out, she really was. She could finally

stop relying on Celestia for everything: she'd have her own apartment, she'd make her own money, make her own food. No more angry yelling or disobedience and no more Celestia thinking that she had any right or authority to tell Sunset what to do with her life. She was grateful Celestia let her live with her, sure, but it was the least she could do after she banished her from her home.

She never bothered to differentiate the two Celestias. If Princess Celestia was awful to Sunset, this world's Celestia couldn't be much different.

And that theory was proven when the woman sat her down, and offered to help her move out and find her own place.

"I would like to make it clear that I am not kicking you out of here, and you will always have somewhere to return to if you wish," she had said, *"I simply believe you may be happier living independently."*

It was a deep kindness, though it was a kindness that came at a cost, Sunset was sure. She didn't know what it was, but there was simply no world in which a woman would pay for a stranger's home out of sheer kindness. Either there would be a great price later, or Celestia simply wanted to be rid of her so badly that she would pay her to leave.

Either way, Sunset took the offer - though not without insisting, not very politely, that she would sort it all herself. She had no idea how, she hadn't even gone through this process in Equestria, but she was determined to see it through by herself. She didn't need anyone, let alone Celestia.

(Of course, she was not able to do it by herself. This world's government and finances were far too weird and complicated, and frankly unfair, for her to handle them alone. Begrudgingly, she needed Celestia's help on that front).

There was a huge downside, however. Sunset had to keep going to school.

Sunset tried very hard to convince Celestia to drop out. The classes were far too easy for her, even in the highest ability groups, which wasn't a surprise given that Sunset was not really a teenager. She learned all this information a little less than a decade ago. Sunset had more than proved she could pass all her classes with flying colours without study, and yet that was still not enough for Celestia to let her start working.

With only part-time hours, she could not afford to pay for her apartment by herself.

Which meant she would be reliant on Celestia for who-knows how long.

Sunset had punched a wall, screamed, and thrown things. She did anything and everything to make Celestia hate her enough to leave her be, damn it. For the entire year that they had lived together, Sunset made herself a nightmare.

She skipped class, she never showed up to therapy, she yelled, she pushed and hit people - anyone who got in her way. She insulted and bullied her way to the top of the school, her classmates making making themselves an all too easy target for her frustrations. She would drink and party and sneak out to the city, creating art on the walls with stolen spray paint, and stay out all night with no word.

If she caused enough carnage, after all, she would be expelled and she could finally work and support herself full time.

But every time Sunset came home, or came into Celestia's office, all she would do is speak to her in a low, calm voice, explaining why what she did was wrong, ask for empty apologies, and allow her to continue as she wished.

No yelling. No punishment. Only disappointed looks and unhappy eyes.

It only made Sunset more angry.

And Sunset sat in the middle of what will no longer be her room, surrounded by boxes of all the things Celestia bought for her, and she was suddenly overcome with a rage she didn't understand.

She kicked and screamed, ripping open boxes and throwing books and clothes, creating a mess unlike she had ever done while living in this house. She was a hurricane, angry, purposeless, and one-minded. She didn't know why she was so angry, why she cried so often, and why she could not bring herself to be kind to a single person - not even the one who offered her a home, food, and safety - and she cried even more when she thought of her home.

It was all utterly unfair. And it was all the fault of Princess Celestia. If only she hadn't - if only she hadn't been like *that*, none of this would have happened. She



wouldn't have come here and ruined the lives of this Celestia, and the students at her school. She wouldn't have to get used to an alien body, or learn how an entirely new world works. She wouldn't have to be a damned emotional teenager again, and heavens, she wouldn't be so *angry*.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair. *It wasn't fair.*

Celestia had come home during her meltdown and simply sat with her while Sunset cried. She tried to help her repack, but Sunset only yelled at her more, because it was *her stuff, dammit!* So, instead, she sat at the edge of the room with a straight face and understanding in her eyes, as Sunset hurled insult after insult at her.

Later that day, when Celestia finally left her alone in her new apartment, Sunset only laid on her bed, still and haunted.



Sunset Shimmer never understood Celestia.

Even years later, she couldn't fathom how she put up with her for so long, with unwavering care and understanding. Sunset had made herself quite the villain, entirely on purpose, for so long. And even though she succeeded in the hatred from everyone, she could never quite convince Celestia that she was a bad person.

It was exactly that fact that was running through her head as she sat with Celestia, watching her friends run around and dance during the prom preparations. They had all decided to form a Prom Committee of sorts, in hopes that this would be the best party Canterlot High would ever see. In the hands of their friends? Sunset had no doubt about it.

"I'm very proud of you, you know," Celestia said, suddenly as Sunset noted down any final supplies needed. Sunset paused, a strange feeling stirring within her. She smiled awkwardly.

"Really? Why?"

Celestia looked at her incredulously, but took a moment before speaking.

"Hm. Are you proud of Twilight?"

Sunset's head whipped around, as swift as the apparent topic change, and fully focused on Celestia, confused. She simply looked at Sunset with her eyebrow raised. "Of course! She's come so far since Crystal Prep; it was really rough for her at first, but she's really settled in and made friends now. I think she's the strongest person I know."

"Yes, indeed. Sounds like someone else you and I are familiar with."

Sunset's brow furrowed. "You mean like... uhh, Wallflower Blush?"

Celestia giggled, which only made Sunset's cheeks flush. "No, silly. Wallflower has also come very far, but no, I was talking about you."

Sunset's cheeks reddened further, and she looked away. It seems the topic hadn't changed after all. "Oh."

Celestia took in Sunset's hesitance, even if she tried to appear grateful and, well, believing. Celestia looked back at the scene where Pinkie Pie and Rarity argued over the colour of the balloons.

"Let's see. You came to this school while entirely unfamiliar with it, and the world around you. Yes, the first few years were... intense, and you really struggled to fit in, but now? Look at you: you have a group of wonderful friends, you've made yourself a supportive and kind member of this school, and you are going to university to pursue something you love. You've even reconnected with, um, the other Celestia. Is that not something to be proud of?"

Sunset stayed silent for a moment. She's done a great deal of work trying to atone for her horrible deeds, and while it seemed the world had forgiven her, she struggled to find that same forgiveness towards herself. "I suppose."

"Could you not offer yourself the same grace that you give to Twilight?"

"I... I think," Sunset started, and tried to swallow the lump in her throat, "I think it will take a while before I can do that. I know, logically, that everyone is, uh, okay with me, but- I dunno, I don't think I can fully believe it myself yet."

Celestia looked at her with something that Sunset had never seen before. "That is quite alright, I think. As long as you trust that we are telling the truth."

"I do." Sunset picked up her notebook again, keen to avoid the topic of self-hatred and remorse, but she found she couldn't concentrate. Not until she knew the answer. "Why did you never give up on me?"

That took Celestia by surprise. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, I was a nightmare kid. I was awful to everyone, but especially to you. Even though you did so much for me. You were always so... kind. Understanding. Why?"

Celestia thought for a moment, clearly unsure how to respond. Sunset felt a pang of guilt at putting her on the spot like that, and she tried to give Celestia the space to formulate her answer.



It seemed that Pinkie and Rarity agreed to a colour.

"Is it not my responsibility, as a teacher, to support the development of young minds, especially through hardship? I would treat anyone else the same."

"I guess, but... Surely, there's a limit?"

"Sunset, when you first came here, you did not know how to walk, you seemed fascinated by everything around you, and, above all, you were scared. I thought you had come from a very... unfortunate environment. Now I know that was not the case, and I am eternally grateful and relieved for that, however, it was the only explanation that I and the doctors could come up with - even if their tests did not show any evidence.

My point is, dear, that I was working with a very dark perception of you and your past. I knew what I was getting myself into from the beginning, and I vowed I would give you the best chance at a life that I could give. When it came down to it, I believed that was all you needed: a chance."

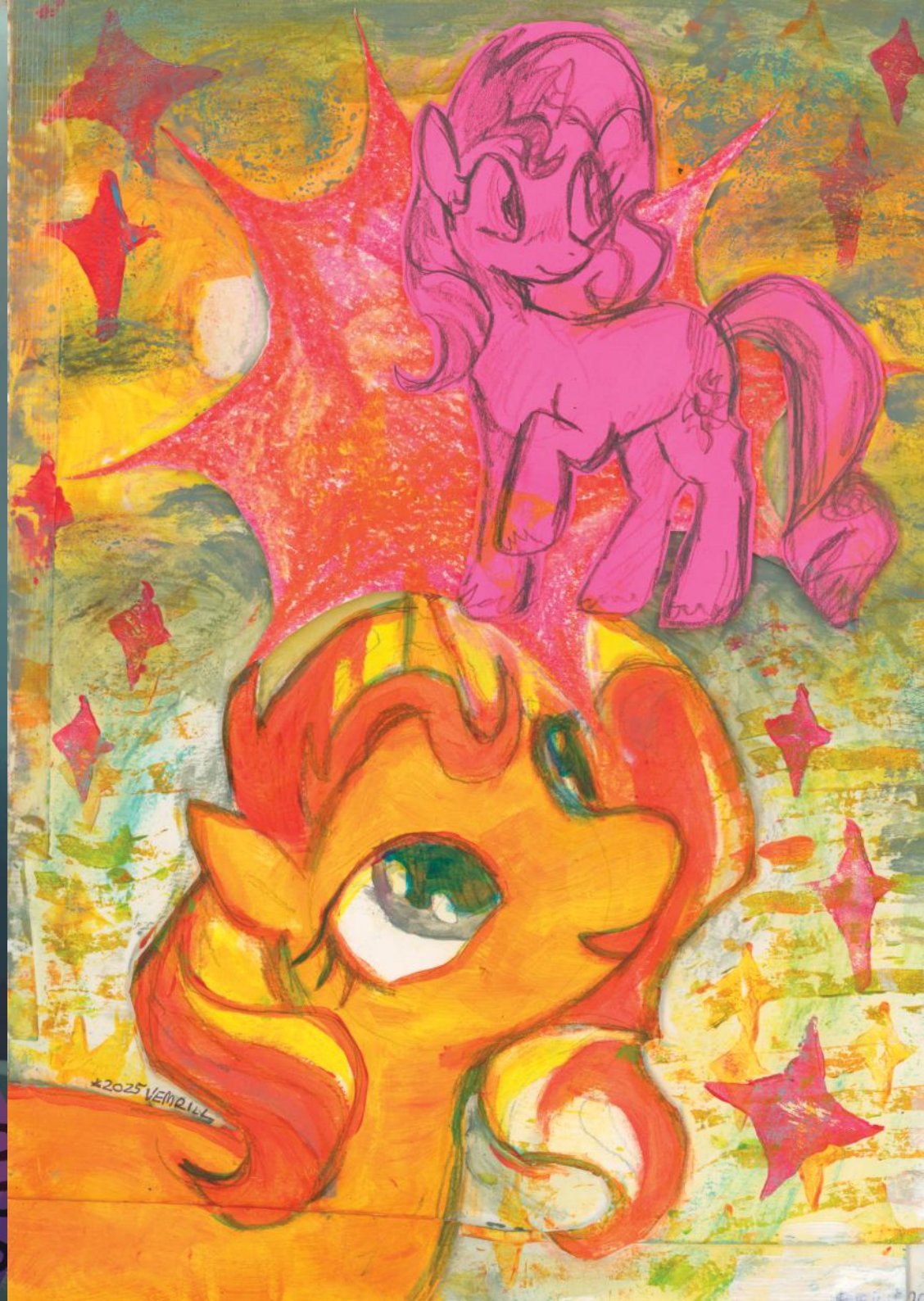
Celestia beamed. "And look at you now."

Sunset smiled back, her heart full and excited for wherever her life will lead her next. "Yeah..."



"Look at me now."









What do you think it means now?

written by SojournSunrise art by poofycats and egggoatt

The gentle grass was a relief for Sunset's tired hooves. She'd forgotten just how worn out she'd get after a day trotting through Canterlot Castle's unforgiving marble and stone. She carefully peeked over her shoulder across the vibrant array of colors back the way she came. Nope, no followers. No more ponies with clipboards, no more curious students, no more excited Twilight, nothing. As much as she yearned for it all just this morning, she breathed a slow sigh of relief at finally having a moment to herself.

A long, deep breath filled Sunset's lungs, the fresh air tinged with the aroma of the exotic flowers around her. Hints of lilac swirled in with a touch of jasmine, lavender danced in her senses together with a wisp of rose, all coming together in that familiar concoction of the Canterlot Gardens.

A gentle smile formed on her lips as she walked along the flowerbeds, careful to avoid the cobblestones. The rainbow of shades always seemed most vibrant washed in the soft orange light of the sunset. She'd forgotten just how much she enjoyed these little walks. Sunset's eyes traced across the professionally-sorted collection of colors. Every few steps held another set of wonders most ponies would never even see in their lives, but Sunset kept her pace past it all.

As much as she'd love to peruse the exotic collection again, her mind was already set. She trotted through the maze of shades, surprised that the grass still kept its indent from the path she trod all those years ago. The sun burned through most of the garden, but the closer Sunset got to her favorite corner, the more the comfort of the shade encroached. One of the north towers rose into the sky above her, its alabaster face reaching down towards a section most ponies never really bothered going. Through a lattice arch, Sunset trotted on before finding her spot, her own little piece of paradise only her, the gardeners, and one other soul really spent much time in.

The aroma hit her nose and Sunset closed her eyes at the feeling. The air in this little corner was always a little fresher thanks to the scent. The light, airy mix of honey with a hint of strawberry settled around her, and Sunset happily took in a deep breath and eased down onto her haunches. The uncomfortable thoughts she came here to get away from threatened at the edge of her mind, but the immense pleasure of getting to sit here again kept them at bay.

Her eyes opened to the familiar purple and yellow hints escaping off of the white petals. Freesia. Celestia always had a fondness for these, though not many other ponies would've picked them as their favorite. A smile crept onto Sunset's lips as the light breeze flowing through the air and the distant sound of wind chimes melded with the memories of her old mentor's voice. Her chest tightened a little bit. Some memories aren't quite as pleasant as they once were. The comfort of the spot sat bitter in her mind the more she let herself think. Old frustrations of the conversations hung in the air still, and new anxieties she'd been avoiding all day allowed themselves in around their edges.

"I thought I might find you here," a voice cut through the silence, making Sunset jump in place. Her mind shifted gears as she spun around to see the offending presence. A gasp left her lips as the familiar rainbow flow of divine hair snapped against an ethereal wind, though instead of flying in its usual full glory, it was bound in a quaint little tie.

"P-princess Celestia?" Sunset asked as she looked her up and down. Her eyes darted down to the grass in embarrassment. The usual shimmering gold plating of her royal regalia was absent, instead leaving nothing to adorn her body aside from her own flowing white fur.

"Twilight said you'd be visiting this weekend. You were bringing in a few new students for her school?" Celestia said with a warm, welcoming expression.

Sunset cleared her throat. A familiar nervousness settled within her stomach in the presence of the princess. "Oh... yeah. With a little more contact between each side of the portal, seems there are quite a few people that wanted to try it out. Someone's gotta show 'em around, right?"

Celestia took a few more steps in, her gaze shifting towards the flowers. Sunset shifted backwards. In a flash, her mind took her back to those painful steps into the throne room to see her mentor again. The tightness in her stomach, the lump in her throat, the wince readied for the verbal lashing she was sure to receive. Even though none of it actually came in that meeting, part of her still expected it, even today. Sunset does her best to straighten up and swallow her shame, though her

reluctant posture did little to hide it.

"That sounds like a wonderful time. New friends and a vacation. What more could a pony ask for?" Celestia's tone was light and filled with an unfamiliar joy. Her long hoof raised up to bring one of the flowers a little closer, until she could take in a long sniff for herself. "I'm so glad Tulip is still taking such good care of these. I'll have to ask her to come by the cottage sometime to help me plant a few."

Sunset stood silent. The air was heavy with anticipation and she fidgeted in place as she waited. Celestia, however, spun around with a bright smile to take in the enclosed garden with its carefully curated circle of freesia. "I do miss our little meetings here. So much nicer than the dusty old library in the west tower. Though here I did wish you were a little less fond of fire magic. Poor Juniper must've had a heart attack after that incident with your phoenix spell."

A nervous laugh left Sunset's lips. "Yeah... can't even see the scorch marks on the walls anymore." Sunset tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

Celestia giggled and brought a hoof up to her mouth. "Oh, I'd nearly forgotten about the hole you almost punched through the tower. I'll be telling that story for years."

Sunset blinked as her posture eased up. The gears in her mind slowly stopped grinding at the thought of her scolding and instead backed up with confusion. Giggling? Reminiscing? The stern and serious mentor she'd known all those years no longer stood in front of her—this seemed like a different pony entirely.

"You... you really did retire, didn't you?" Sunset said as she took a tentative, curious step forward.

Celestia giggled and put a hoof to her mouth. "Is it that obvious?"

"No... no, it's just, you seem different. Twilight told me you were stepping down, but I thought... Well, I don't really know what I thought. Being a foreign ambassador? An all-powerful archmage? A wise mentor for future Equestrian saviors?"

Celestia let out another low laugh before tracing her gaze longingly towards the grass. "No... nothing that exciting. Though trying to get Luna to get out of her shell and have some fun is much harder than dealing with foreign delegates ever was. You should have seen her on our last beach trip. I tried everything, but it was like trying to get a cat to come swimming. She did take to the sandcastles pretty well though. She made this ridiculously complex thing, even had its own drawbridge. I



think I have a picture saved somewhere, I'll have to show you."

Sunset couldn't help but blink in confusion again. Her mind battled with her own conception fiercely as she watched her old mentor go on. It sure looked like Celestia, but something about hearing her talk about a beach trip with her sister sent mixed signals to her brain.

"...Disappointed?" Celestia asked with an amused grin.

Sunset shook her head. "No, of course not. I guess I just never really saw, well, this."

Celestia's smile dropped from her lips, and in its place a slow, forlorn sigh flowed out. "I suppose after so many years on the throne, it got more and more difficult to be the real me. So many appearances to keep up, it was absolutely exhausting. And with my students," she slowed down, clearing her throat. "I had to be someone different for them too..." Celestia straightened up, then put back on her friendly smile. "But now, I don't really have to care what any noble or foreign dignitary thinks, so I get to let loose a little," she said with a sly wink.

The all-powerful alicorn quickly transformed into the cool aunt at the family function before Sunset's eyes, and she had no idea what to do about it. The latent anxiety still whisked against her gut, though its hold loosened significantly. Her mouth hung open in bewilderment as she tried to find some words past her own mental malfunction, but to no avail.

"I know you were never much for casual small talk. When we spoke last, you had come seeking a book on some old magical artifact, correct? To help restore your friends' memories? How long ago was that?"

"Yeah," Sunset said. "Maybe a year ago now? I haven't really kept track."

"Too long, at any rate. There was a lot I would've liked to say back then, a lot I didn't put the thought to that I should have. Perhaps it wasn't the time anyway, though I do regret waiting this long to try."



The familiar nervousness returned. Sunset gulped before opening her mouth again. “What... what did you want to talk about?”

Celestia took in a breath, and Sunset braced for the worst. She expected to hear all about her moral failings, her descent into anger and ambition, scoldings and cautions like she expected that day.

“I wanted to apologize first.”

“Huh?” Sunset asked, her mouth hanging open in surprise. “Wait, I have way more that I’d still need to apologize for.”

A white hoof waved through the air and Celestia’s head shook with it. “No, no. Your apologies have already been made, Sunset. I know how much you’ve worked to be a better person and make the friends you have. You’ve done more than enough to make up for your mistakes.” Another deep breath from Celestia, then another slow sigh. “I, however, have not.”

“Wha... what do you mean?” Sunset examined the alicorn closely. The once-proud, regal princess now sat before her with a sullen sadness and a hint of shame in her eyes, despite the warm expression towards her.

“You were such a bright filly, Sunset. You had a talent most unicorns would never come to realize. I saw so much potential in you to be a force to change this world, but I hadn’t the slightest clue how to properly guide it.”

Sunset pursed her lips and waited, her mind still not fully wrapping around the situation.

“You have no idea how much I think back and wonder what might’ve been if I’d pushed you in a different direction, or perhaps been a little more involved. Some important lessons that Twilight taught me I should’ve known all along, and if I had...” Celestia solemnly shook her head, then looked out towards the castle. “I know a lot of unfortunate things could’ve been avoided.”

The air shifted as Celestia took in a slow breath, then steeled herself to look back into Sunset’s eyes. “I didn’t see the anger in you. By the time I knew the depths of your frustrations with my methods, it was already too late. Admittedly, when I first found you, I thought honing your abilities was the key to utilizing the elements, but by the time I knew something else was needed, your resentment had already grown a darkness in your heart that I couldn’t help.”

The anxiety in Sunset’s stomach had washed away after hearing that. In its place

stirred all-too familiar feelings of anger, hate, resentment, and frustration. She gritted her teeth hard and asked. “Why didn’t you just tell me? Why not just say what would’ve helped?”

“Truthfully, I wasn’t entirely sure. When I’d first utilized the elements with my sister all those years ago, I never fully understood the magic we wielded, much less why they’d no longer respond to us. I had my assumptions, but it wasn’t until I’d run out of time and had to trust that Twilight would find the answer on her own that it all became clear.”

Sunset looked down into the grass, contemplating the conception of her all-knowing teacher with the mare standing in front of her, admitting her own lack of knowledge. Years of fighting against vague parables and loose platitudes started to make sense.

“Though, if I had known, do you think you would have listened?” Celestia asked, that deep sadness and regret still lingering in her eyes.

Sunset let out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding, and some of her own bubbling anger with it. “No... I don’t think so.”

A silence crept in between them. Celestia desperately looked into Sunset’s eyes, but the flurry of emotions kept Sunset’s gaze firmly in the grass. The memories gnashed at her mind, all the feelings she thought she was over tried to claw their way back. Sunset thought she’d dealt with them by now.

“I remember the night you left. I remember it like it happened just yesterday. I knew how frustrated you were, I could see the hate and anger in your eyes. I know what you wanted, but I wonder every day how I could’ve told you what you really needed instead.”

“And what could I possibly need instead?” Sunset snapped, looking up to see Celestia wince at her tone. Sunset grimaced herself before slinking back. “...Sorry.”

“It’s quite alright. I don’t blame you for being angry,” Celestia said, adopting that familiar warm smile again.

“So what did I really need?” Sunset asked, trying to exchange her latent anger for curiosity.

“A friend.” The former princess took a tentative step towards her student before settling beside her. “I see now the difference it made with you, with Twilight, with

everyone who embraces it. I only wish I could've given you that gift sooner."

The night she left flashed in Sunset's mind. She felt the vitriol on her tongue as she spat her frustrations at her teacher, just sitting there with a book floating in front of her. Her rage exploded out at another vague parable and urge to patience. It felt like a lifetime of waiting for the inevitable. As she searched her memories, the gnawing feelings gave way to shame instead, urging Sunset to shake her head.

"No... my mistakes, who I was then... I don't know that anything would've helped aside from learning it the hard way."

"You knew how much better friends made your life before all that. I know there was some path to helping you remember that."

Sunset shook her head again. "I doubt it. Ever since I had to deal with—"

"Marquise in magic school?" Celestia asked.

"How did you know that?" Sunset said as she looked up to those purple eyes, perplexed.

"I always thought the best way for you to learn was to find your own path to solving the problems set out before you. It's only now I know that some hurts should've been avoided entirely, or that you should've at least had someone there for you to help you through it."

"Wait, you knew I was getting bullied as soon as I got into magic school?"

Celestia gave her a solemn nod. "There was a lot I should've done differently. While I was proud of you for being able to take control of the situation, perhaps a gentle nudge towards more... dignified methods was necessary."

Sunset's cheeks burned hot and she instantly turned away. "So... you heard about that."

Her orange fur jumped as Sunset felt the gentle brush of a comforting feather against her back. "I know you've put much of your past behind you. I'm not here to hold it against you now." Sensing the sudden shift in tone, Celestia leaned down to show Sunset her warm, loving expression yet again. "Nothing has made me happier than knowing how far you've come with the friends you've made. I can only hope that you'd accept my apology for not being able to help you get there sooner."

An old flare of anger sparked inside of her. She wanted to yell, to scream at her old teacher for denying her what she'd built her whole life for, but instead, Sunset took a slow, deep breath. "I... shouldn't blame you. I mean, I don't blame you," she urged, ignoring the twinge of her old self crying out. "I would've always had to put in the work to be who I am now, and I'm probably not even done. So... apology accepted? I don't... Well, I try not to hold onto those feelings anymore."

"That makes one of us, I suppose." Sunset could see Celestia's lips were turned up, but her eyes betrayed a deep sadness she'd never seen before. "I hope one day you could forgive me and come to know me as a friend as well."

Words drifted in and out of Sunset's mind. There were a thousand different things she wanted to say, some of them out of anger, some out of sympathy, but nothing managed to pierce through the veil of her own flurry of feelings. "I... I don't really know what to say."

Celestia smirked, then let her wing drift a little further over Sunset's back. "That's okay. I'm just glad I've finally gotten the chance to get that off my chest. I think you deserve a little more honesty after all of those... less direct lessons."

Sunset let out a weak laugh. "Yeah..."

Celestia's gaze drifted back towards the castle. "Do you still wish things had ended up differently?"

Sunset's eyes went wide at the rather direct question. Her gaze flitted toward Celestia for a moment before settling down to look at the alabaster walls that covered the throne room. "I guess some part of me still does. It's hard not to think about. I spent my whole life being the most powerful unicorn I could be, and it's only now that it's all gone that I get to see any other way." Sunset pawed at a patch of grass as the pause between them grew. "I know I wasn't ready. I don't think I am now either. I mean, I could barely handle dealing with people as the head of the yearbook committee. I'd probably go tyrannical within the week if I had to deal with all those snobby nobles and foreign ambassadors."

Celestia let out a short laugh. "Some aspects of being a princess were certainly better than others."

The air grew heavy as old thoughts assaulted Sunset's mind, thoughts she decided she was done with, yet still clung to the edges of her psyche. All the what-ifs and whys stung in familiar ways, even if she thought she'd moved on. "Maybe I could've handled all that. I mean Twilight doesn't seem too much more stressed out

than usual, though I don't know how she's dealt with some of the ponies she has without zapping them. I think though, if I did it over, I'd still try to find a way to meet my friends again. I wouldn't be who I am without them."

The sadness that filled Celestia's weary eyes seemed to lift as their gazes met. "I think that might be all that really matters in the end."

Sunset gave her a weak smile, then lifted a hoof to bite at a thumb that wasn't there anymore. A soft, amused chuckle left her lips as she let her hoof fall back. Anxiety flitted around in her stomach as the feelings she came on this trip to avoid flashed back into her mind.

"I know you well enough to know when something is still wrong, Sunset Shimmer."

Sunset rubbed her temples and let out a frustrated huff. "This is just a lot all at once, you know? I thought I was over being mad at you, but maybe I'm not? I shouldn't be, but hearing you say all this just makes me feel... I don't know, like I wish I would've heard it earlier. Now I'm having to think about what I should've been, what I'm supposed to be, and I just don't have any answers for anyone. I spent my whole life chasing after one thing, and now I'm just... lost. I'm not sure what to make of any of this."

Feathers lightly squeezed against her back. "No matter what, I know that you're meant to do something great, Sunset."

An orange hoof waved towards the castle. "Greater than the ruler of all of Equestria? I screwed that up, so what am I really shooting for now?"

"If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that greatness can't be measured by any title, or how much force you can exert over others. True greatness lies in your capacity to make a difference in the world, to change the lives of those you care about for the better, and leave a shining example for everyone that comes after you to strive for."

The setting sun washed the garden in a full orange glow as it crested the sky. Sunset looked up to her mentor's deep violet eyes once again in that warm light to see the caring soul inside. A familiar comfort she hadn't felt in years washed through her as she intently listened.

"I've asked Twilight for as many updates on you as I could, and I know just how much you've done to change your friends' lives for the better. You've thwarted

challenges and brought people closer through more than just sheer might, but with empathy and understanding. Wallflower Blush, Juniper Montage, your world's Twilight, and so many more now know the magic of friendship thanks all to you. You have a power to help those in need in a way that I think even Twilight lacks, and that, Sunset, is something to be truly proud of."

A genuine smile spreads across Sunset's lips at the praise, but it's short-lived as her own doubt and uncertainty creep back in. "I... thank you, princess. That really does mean a lot."

"Though not enough, is it?"

Sunset blinked. "I didn't mean to..."

Celestia waved her off again. "You may not believe it, but I think I know how you're feeling. Stuck in a situation you were never prepared for, thrust into a new world you never really got ready for, and expected to find the best future for yourself with nothing to go off of."

Sunset settled into a surprised, slow nod. "Yeah, actually. How did you...?"

"Perhaps in time we can talk about me. Right now, I'm worried about you. Tell me what's troubling you," Celestia said as her expression settled into a caring, attentive look.

Sunset took in a breath, then let it out, trying to relax her shoulders, but the latent stress held there remained. "All my friends know what they want to do with their lives. Now that high school is over, everyone's picked out the college they're going to and the career paths they're going to take, and I just have absolutely no idea where to take myself." The patch of grass under Sunset's hoof was slowly scraped aside. "My whole life, I knew exactly where I was going, what I was supposed to be, and now that we're all looking at the next step in our lives, I just feel more lost than ever. I have no idea who I even want to be on the other side of it all."

Celestia tapped her chin with a hoof before her expression brightened, and she looked back down to Sunset. "Do you remember when I asked you what you thought your cutie mark meant?"

Sunset raised an eyebrow. The memory was as clear as day in her mind. It was another long walk down the castle hallways, right after a magic demonstration she blew out of the park for her lessons. She remembered feeling the beaming pride at seeing all those proctors with their jaws on the floor, then coming to Celestia only to

feel... disappointment. Sunset gritted her teeth at the uncomfortable feeling. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I got it wrong."

"Well, far be it from me to tell a pony what their cutie mark should mean to them, but I did think you might've been a little... overenthusiastic about the wrong ideas."

Sunset belted out another quick chuckle. "That's one way to put it. The unrelenting power of the sun, I think it was."

"Something like that." Feathers lightly brushed up Sunset's back, like an encouraging nudge for someone riding a bike for the first time. "What do you think it means now?"

Sunset looked down. It'd been so long since she could even really see it that she hadn't even thought about it. "I... I'm not really sure."

"Well, you know how it came to you."

Sunset nodded. "Finally using that spell... to save my friends," she said, her eyes widening at the sudden realization. "When everything seemed hopeless, I managed to light up the dark and break us out of there. Maybe... maybe it means that I have the power to bring something to others when they need it most, that I can shine a light on those that need it."

Celestia let out a breath and sat contented in the warmth of the encroaching evening. "As sure as the sun sets, it will always have the power to rise again to be there for a world that needs it. No matter how dark the night, the dawn will come to bring light into the hearts of all it shines upon."

Seeing her mentor smile into the warmth of the setting sun let a calming comfort wash through Sunset. A genuine, grateful joy spread across her face, and she leaned into the wing around her a little more.

Celestia started again. "You've already been embracing your own talents with those whose lives you've changed forever." The alicorn shifted, bringing her hoof up in tandem with her wings to wrap Sunset in an enveloping hug of feathers and fur. "I know you'll do just fine, Sunset. You've already become a more amazing pony than I ever could've hoped for."

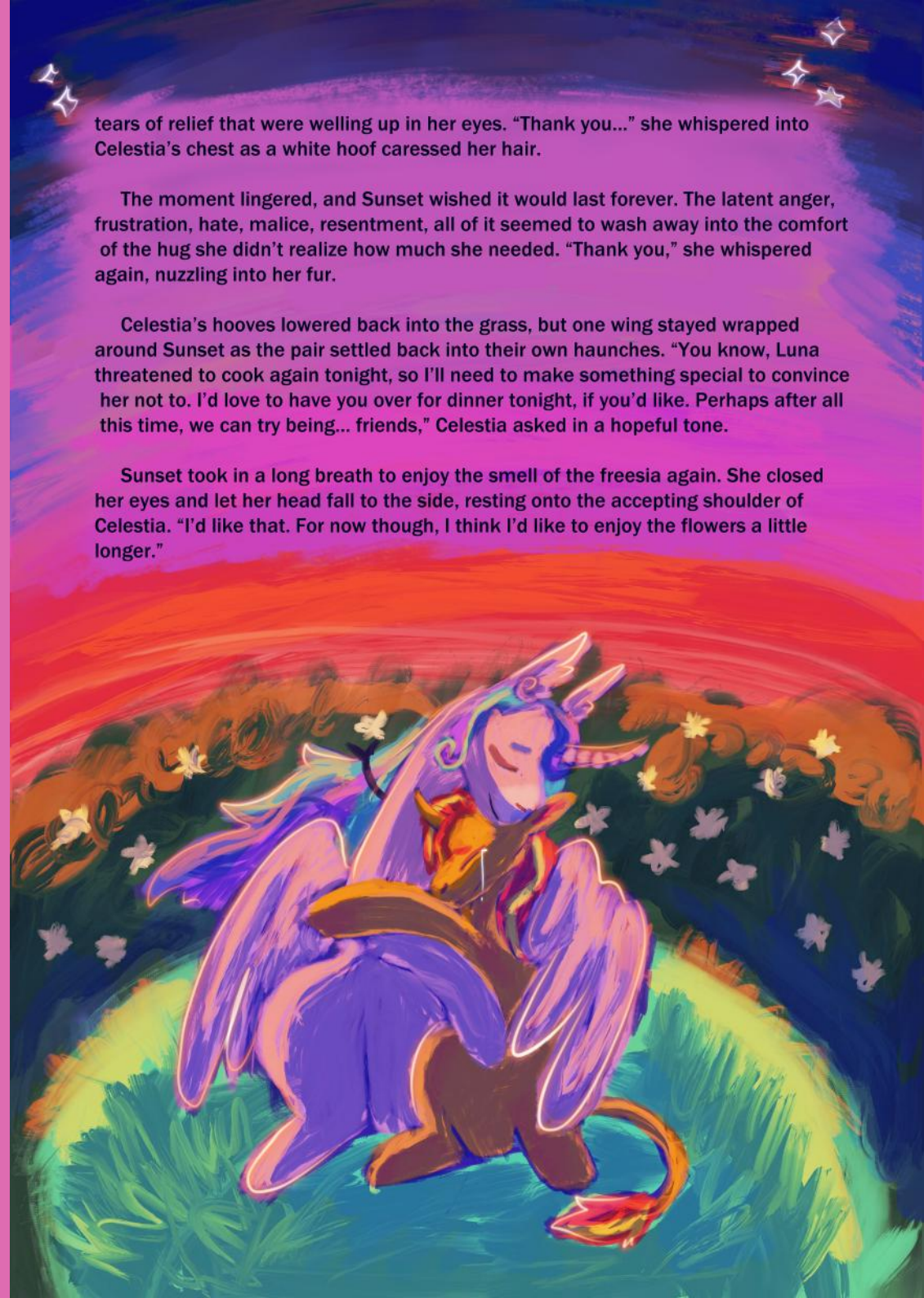
Sunset gasped as she felt the softness of Celestia cover her. Her words spread over her senses like a salve, and the tense, stressed muscles all relaxed into the embrace in an instant. She melted into those caring arms, not bothering to stop the

tears of relief that were welling up in her eyes. "Thank you..." she whispered into Celestia's chest as a white hoof caressed her hair.

The moment lingered, and Sunset wished it would last forever. The latent anger, frustration, hate, malice, resentment, all of it seemed to wash away into the comfort of the hug she didn't realize how much she needed. "Thank you," she whispered again, nuzzling into her fur.

Celestia's hooves lowered back into the grass, but one wing stayed wrapped around Sunset as the pair settled back into their own haunches. "You know, Luna threatened to cook again tonight, so I'll need to make something special to convince her not to. I'd love to have you over for dinner tonight, if you'd like. Perhaps after all this time, we can try being... friends," Celestia asked in a hopeful tone.

Sunset took in a long breath to enjoy the smell of the freesia again. She closed her eyes and let her head fall to the side, resting onto the accepting shoulder of Celestia. "I'd like that. For now though, I think I'd like to enjoy the flowers a little longer."





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